



INTERZONE

SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY • ISSUE 198 • MAY/JUNE 2005

FANTASTIC NEW STORIES

CHRIS BECKETT
MATTHEW HUGHES
CHRISTOPHER EAST
JOHN AEGARD
DOMINIC GREEN

THE INCREDIBLE CAREER
OF CULT AUTHOR JEFF LINT

STEVE AYLETT

ORIGINAL ART

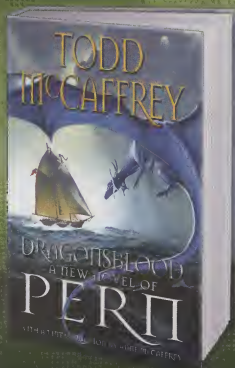
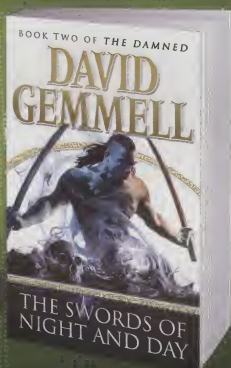
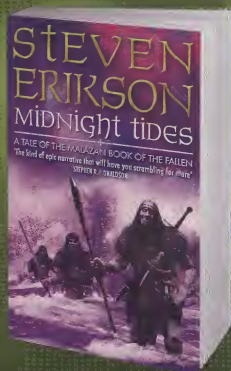
JOHN G. WILLIAMS • CHRIS NURSE
KENN BROWN • DOUGLAS SIROIS
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EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW BY RICK KLEFFEL

KAZUO ISHIGURO ON THE SCIENCE FICTION IN NEVER LET ME GO

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DAVID MATHEW

INTERFACE

WHAT YOU GOT?



oodling around on the Internet recently, I came across an archived interview with a musical hero of mine – Tom Waits – which had been directed by the filmmaker Jim Jarmusch. The two men have worked together on a number of projects, but the talk at the time had turned to Jarmusch's movie, *Night on Earth*, for which Waits had composed (triumphantly, in my opinion) and which had featured a most unusual percussionist. If the anecdotes are to be believed, this gentleman would arrive for recording, not only without any drums to play – and not only without any drumsticks to play them with – but carrying a pistol, rain or shine. And what he would ask, simply enough, is: What you got?

Not for one moment would I presume to compare myself with a genius like Tom Waits, but the reported tone of expectancy, expressed in the interview, struck a chord. Andy Cox recruited three (paradoxically) likeminded and utterly different Assistant Editors for the ride of the revamp, and – more in retrospect, perhaps, but certainly *in part* at the time – there was among our samey and varied numbers an acceptance of that very same question: What you got?

Well, what *did* we have?

Speaking personally, a sense of shared expectation, perhaps; and between us, a good four decades in the genres, either as writers, editors, proofreaders or some such. None of which, of course, means much more than a piss in a puddle. Who cares? Quite frankly, the following message came to our ears and eyes loud and clear: make it as good, or better, than what had come before. So no pressure, obviously. What we – Andy, Peter Tennant, Jetse de Vries and yours truly – were being hoped to possess were the skills of reading and presenting. Read good stories, please, and present them nicely if you'd be so kind.

We have done our best to achieve this since the starting gun was fired. What other possible aim could there ever have been? The four of us came together with

a combined love of genre material that is not solely represented by the work that you hold in your hands, but we certainly coincide more often in opinion than we repel one another. Which is no mean feat, in itself. We have respect for one another's opinions, but we fight for the tales we believe in.

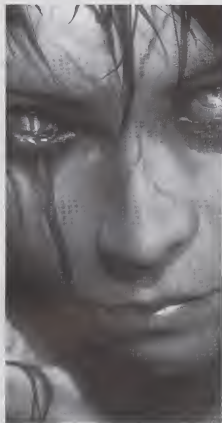
Even more obscure, perhaps, than the Tom Waits allusion with which I opened this brief editorial is one that I doubt will mean much to anyone outside the British Isles, but stick with me. Because of the moment that I'm about to recall – a moment that made me have to pull over to the side of the A5, laughing, on my way to an appointment in a place close to my home called Milton Keynes – has left me twelve-or-so years on, with a favourite phrase. The setting was the Danny Baker show, on Radio One. Every week he used to go on air and read the graffiti that his colleague had penned across the photographs in the day's papers, for humorous effect. It worked on Baker and it worked on me. And the one I recall most – it makes me smile, even now – is the picture (even *more* obscure reference approaching) of the actor who played George in *George and Mildred*, a sitcom; and scrawled across his forehead was: WE FEAR CHANGE.

That's going to leave some people – a lot of people – cold. But I think I'm right in saying that the phrase neatly encapsulates the sensations of some of *Interzone's* readers, on waiting for our inaugural issue. (I'm not referring to those, and there were several more than plenty, who had started the hyena-barks of complaint *before* the first issue was out. Even *guilty* men are permitted a trial, for crying out loud!) But no: the long-term readers, the short-term readers – those here, there and everywhere. Those coming aboard for the first time. Here's hoping that the good quality continues to come in; that we choose how to work best to present it; and that any cries of 'What you got?' are made with a sense of hope based on good past experiences, and not fear.

David Mathew

I found a couple of pandas consuming my garden furniture this morning. Ever since they found a way to genetically modify the bastards to *mange tout* with an infusion of goat protoplasm or suchlike, and some bleeding heart Animal Rights activists liberated a facility and set a breeding pair free, you can't move for them. No natural predators, see, the East Anglian panda.

Read 'Dying in the Arms of Jean Harlow (The Coming of the Autoscoopes)' by Paul Meloy in *The 3rd Alternative* Issue 42, out in June



ART BY CAMILLE KUD FROM ITA2



NEW FICTION

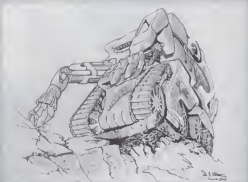
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Kenn Brown
www.kontent-online.com
Thanks Kenn!

PICCADILLY CIRCUS

Chris Nurse

GO TELL THE PHOENICIANS

Stefan Olsen

BASTOGNE V.9

Josh Finney & Kat Rocha
www.glitchwerk.com

COURT OF THE BEAST-EMPEROR

Douglas A. Sirois

THE CLOCKWORK ATOM BOMB

John G. Williams



Chief artist/designer Edward Noon **Book reviews** Iain Emsley, Andy Cox **Editors** Jetse de Vries, Peter Tennant, David Mathew, Andy Cox **Publicity** Roy Gray **Typesetter/Publisher** TTA Press **Discussion forum** www.ttapress.com/discus

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CHARLES STROSS HAS THREE HUGO NOMINATIONS

DAVID LANGFORD



ANSIBLE LINK

NEWS

 he 2005 Hugo nominations caused much excitement over here, not least for the unprecedented all-British novel shortlist: Iain M. Banks, *The Algebraist*; China Miéville, *Iron Council*; Charles Stross, *Iron Sunrise*; Susanna Clarke, *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*; Ian McDonald, *River of Gods*. Charlie Stross also collected two short fiction nominations – for ‘The Concrete Jungle’ (*The Atrocity Archives*, Golden Gryphon Press) and ‘Elector’ (*Asimov’s* 09/04) – and both *Interzone* and my own *Ansible* are up for Best Semiprozine, along with *Interzone’s* sister magazine *The 3rd Alternative*. See the full list here: <http://www.interaction.worldcon.org.uk/pressr31.htm>.

As Others See Us. Susan Mitchell draws a careful line: ‘Book sales of fiction, particularly literary fiction, are down. By fiction I don’t mean fantasy, as in *Harry Potter* or *Lord of the Rings*, I mean a story about our lives created from an author’s imagination.’ (*Weekend Australian Financial Review*, 19-20 March) • Mark Lawson, connoisseur of fantasy, notes Ian McKellen’s *Coronation Street* appearance: ‘The explanation for Sir Ian’s soap debut may simply be that he wanted to speak some proper dialogue after appearing in all that Tolkein [sic] trog tosh . . .’ (*Guardian*, 12 March) • Andrew Motion, Poet Laureate, on Radio 4 (6 March): ‘I don’t mean science fiction poems. I mean poems which establish a

manifestly invented world in order to advance recognizable truths about human nature.’ Not like science fiction *at all*, then.

David A. Hardy’s Hugo-nominated art book (co-authored by Patrick Moore) collected another honour in April: ‘*Futures: 50 Years in Space* was awarded a Sir Arthur Clarke Award [not to be confused with the Clarke novel award] for “best written presentation” . . . a handsome engraved glass “obelisk” of exactly the same proportions as the black one in 2001, but also bearing a famous diagram showing three geostationary satellites in orbit.’ Yes, it’s 60 years since Sir Arthur’s *Wireless World* article proposing this harebrained notion.

Thog's Critical Masterclass.

Trenchant opinions from the creator of a certain new *Doctor Who* series: 'It pisses me off when purists say: "Why have Disney done *The Little Mermaid* and changed the ending?" Well, they've reinvented it so that many more millions of children than have ever read the original Oscar Wilde story can come to know and love *The Little Mermaid*.' (*Independent*, 14 March) This in Hans Christian Andersen's bicentenary year...! [Marion Zimmer] Bradley's husband, Leigh Brackett, wrote *The Darkover Concordance: A Reader's Guide* (1979) to help sort out the complexities of the series.' (Applewhite Minyard, *Decades of Science Fiction*, 1998)

R.I.P. E.M. 'Buz' Busby (1921–2005), US author and long-time sf fan, died on 17 February after lengthy illness; he was 83. In an sf career running from his 1957 *Future SF* magazine debut to the late 1990s, his best known novels were *Cage a Man* (1974) and *Rissa Kerguelen* (1976). • **Jack L. Chalker** (1944–2005), well-known US sf writer, editor (Mirage Press) and fan, died on 11 February; he

March at age 93, following long illness and weeks of hospice care at home. She published over 130 books, from a 1934 historical debut to a final solo sf novel published this April, and in 1984 became the first woman to be honoured as SFWA Grand Master. Her many sf series, most famously 'Witch World', were formative influences on countless younger readers. • **Simone Simon** (1910–2005), French actress who gained cult fame in *Cat People* (1942) and *The Curse of the Cat People* (1944), died on 22 February. She was 94.

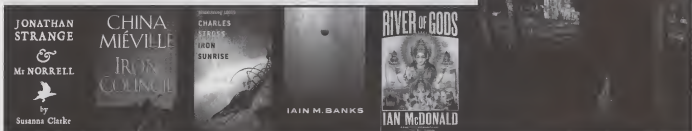
Marmite Ads homaging *The Blob* have terrified young children and earned the disapproval of the Advertising Standards Authority. (BBC News) I too was terrorized by Marmite when little, but the callous media ignored my sufferings. Today's brats have it too easy. Harrumph!

Robert Louis Stevenson, drug-crazed hippy, was allegedly high on an ergot-derived hallucinogen while writing *Jekyll and Hyde* – according to a *Times* story on 20 March.

Sinisalo's Troll: A Love Story, US translation of her Finlandia Prize-winner *Emmen päiävanlaskua ei voi* (2000); UK *Not Before Sundown*, 2003).

We Are Everywhere. Thierry Breton, the former chief manager of France Telecom and Orange who in February was appointed Finance and Economy Minister of France, is also an SF author whose novels *Softwar* (1984), *Vatican III* (1985), and *Netwar* (1987) have been translated into 25 languages.

Thog's Masterclass. Extreme Heliography Dept. 'Signal Mirror: This item may be used to transmit messages in Morse or a similar code over distances of up to 5 miles in full sunlight, up to 2 miles during overcast weather, and up to



THE UNPRECEDENTED ALL-BRITISH HUGO NOVEL SHORTLIST AND CHARLES STROSS AGAIN

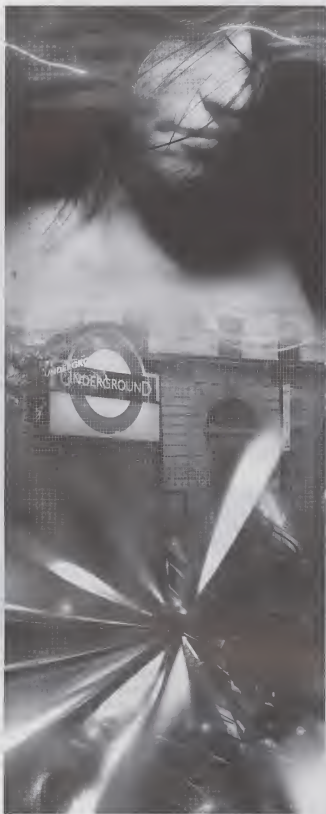
was only 60. His early, idiosyncratic sf novels *A Jungle of Stars* (1976), *Midnight at the Well of Souls* (1977) and *Dancers in the Afterglow* (1978) set a pattern of compulsive, large-scale adventures usually involving bizarre character metamorphoses and (since *Midnight*) building into multi-volume series, some of them bestsellers. • **Sonya Dorman** (1924–2005), US author and poet best known for short sf of the 1960s and 1970s, died on 14 February; she was 80. She won a Rhysling sf poetry award for her 'Corruption of Metals' (1977). • **Karen Wynn Fonstad** (1945–2005), US cartographer who created *The Atlas of Middle-Earth* (1981) and other fantasy and sf map-books, died on 11 March. • **Andre Norton** (1912–2005), US author who needs no introduction, died on 17

Timeslip. Another demonstration that we live in a truly sf world, from play.com's description of the DVD *The Land That Time Forgot*: 'Edgar Rice Burroughs collaborated with Michael Moorcock to write the script for *The Land Before Time*, adapted from his own novel.'

Even Still Yet More Awards. BSFA: Novel: Ian McDonald, *River of Gods*. Short: Stephen Baxter, 'Mayflower 2'. Philip K. Dick: Gwyneth Jones, *Life*. • SFWA Grand Master 2005: Anne McCaffrey. • Spectrum Art Grandmaster: H.R. Giger. • Stoker Horror Grand Master: Michael Moorcock. • Tiptree: Honours for best 'gender-bending' sf of 2004 went to Joe Haldeman's *Camouflage* and Johanna

1 mile at night.' (*Stargate SG-1 Role-Playing Game*, 2003) • Dept of Supersonics. 'The ships were so big, so vast, so fast. Faster than sound. The noise reached you after the ship made it. That was why there was never any warning.' (Nicholas Fisk, *Starstormers*, 1980) • Theory of Numbers Dept. 'The number of vertices of the shapes on the left-hand frame are the first four primes: one, three, five and seven.' (Alastair Reynolds, *Diamond Dogs*, 2001) • Straight On 'Til Morning Dept. 'You simply head your space ship toward your sun for about three million miles, take a sharp turn left and go about five or six million miles and there we will be. Please do come visit us when you build your space ship.' (Sara Cavanaugh, *A Woman in Space*, 1981)





Clarissa Fall is heading for central London to see the lights, bumping along the potholed roads at five miles an hour in her electric invalid car, oblivious to the honking horns, the cars queuing behind her, the angry shouts... How many times has she been warned? How many times has she been humiliated? But she must see the lights.

"When I was a little girl there were still physical lights in Piccadilly Circus," she's telling everyone she can. "I remember my father taking me. They were the most wonderful thing I'd ever seen."

She'd always been odd. There was that business when she cut holes in the wildlife fence to let the animals into the city. There were those young consensual tear-aways she used to insist on bringing home. But things really started getting bad when her husband Terence died, leaving her alone in that big old house by the perimeter, that big fake chateau with its empty fountains and those icy lights that lit it up at night like Dracula's castle. I suppose it was loneliness, though god knows when Terence was alive he and Clarissa never seemed to do anything but fight.

"I am two hundred years old, you know," she kept saying now. "I am the very last physical human being in London."

Neither of these was true, of course, but she was certainly very old and it was certainly the case that she could go for days and even weeks without seeing another physical person. There really weren't many of us left by now and most of us had congregated for mutual support in a couple of clusters in the South London suburbs. No one lived within five miles of Clarissa's phoney chateau on the northern perimeter and no one was much inclined to go and see her. She'd always been histrionic and self-obsessed, and now she was downright crazy. What's more – and most of us found this *particularly* unforgivable – she drew unwelcome attention onto us physicals, both from the consensuals, who already dislike us and call us 'Outsiders' and 'spooks', and from the hidden authorities in the Hub.

Her trouble was that she didn't really feel at home in either world, physical or consensual. The stiff arthritic dignity of the physicals repelled her. She thought us stuffy and smug and she despised our assumption that our own experience was uniquely authentic and true.

"Would you rather the world itself ended than admit the possibility that there may be other kinds of life apart from ours?" she once demanded.

But really, although she always insisted to us that it wasn't so, she was equally disgusted by the superficiality of the consensuals, their uncritical willingness to accept as real whatever the Hub chose to serve up, their lack of curiosity, their wilful ignorance of where they came from or what they really were. While she might criticise us physicals, she never seriously considered the possibility of giving up her own physical being and joining the consensuals with their constructed virtual bodies. And this meant that she would still always be an Outsider to them.

She may have felt at home with no one but she became a nuisance to *everyone* – physical and consensual – as a

result of her forays into the city. At first she went on foot. Then, when she became too frail, she got hold of that little invalid car, a vehicle which the consensuals of North London would soon come to know and hate. Bumping slowly along the crumbling physical roads she would switch off her Field implant so as not to be received by the smooth virtual surface, but this meant that she couldn't see or hear the consensual traffic going by either. She could see only the empty buildings and the cracked and pockmarked surface of the empty road. Consensual drivers just had to cope as best they could with her wanderings back and forth.

When she parked her car, though, she always turned her implant on again. This of course instantly transformed empty ruined physical London into the lively metropolis that was the Urban Consensual Field, a virtual city in imitation of London as it once was, superimposed by the Hub over what London had become. Clarissa could still just remember those old days: the crowds, the fumes, the lights, the noise, the hectic life of a city in which, bizarrely, it still seemed feasible for millions of physical human beings to casually consume what they wanted of the physical world's resources, and casually discard what they didn't. And she craved that bustle and that life, she craved it desperately.

We all had Field implants of course. They were a necessity for dealing with a civilisation that had become, whether we liked it or not, primarily digital. Spliced into our nervous system, they allowed consensual constructs to be superimposed over our perceptions of the material world, so that we could see the same world that the consensuals saw, hear what they heard and, to a limited degree, touch what they touched. The rest of us invariably took the position that we didn't like having to deal with the consensual world, but it was sometimes a necessary evil. But for Clarissa it was different. When she switched on her implant it wasn't a matter of practical necessity for her, it was more like injecting heroin into an artery. All at once there were people all around her, there was life, there were shop windows and market stalls piled high with colourful merchandise, and the dizzying suddenness of it was like the hit of a powerful drug.

But this drug wasn't the Field, it was the moment of crossing over. After that first moment the experience never lived up to its initial promise, for however hard Clarissa tried, the consensual world shut her out. And she did try. She spent hours in the consensual city outside shops and in parks and on street corners making rather pathetic efforts to engage people in conversation, but most people avoided her and some made no secret of their contempt. It was true that a few kind souls suppressed their revulsion at her age and her physicality and briefly allowed her the illusion that she had made a friend, but it was only out of kindness. Even apart from being an Outsider she really wasn't good company. She talked too much; she didn't listen; and, what was worse, however much she might criticise her fellow Outsiders for our existential snobbery, she herself was as much of a snob as any of us and a lot less inhibited about it. She could never resist pointing out to consensuals the shallow and illusory nature of their existence: "You're so very nice dear. It's such a pity that you're not really here."

Usually she found herself alone in a kind of lacuna, with people moving aside to pass her by at a safe distance. And in these situations she would often become distressed and start to rant and shout: "You're not real you know! You're just bits of nervous tissue plugged into a computer! You're far away from here and the computer is sending you pictures of the real London



with all this consensual nonsense superimposed on top of it!"

Terence used to talk like that a lot when he was alive, as haughty old physicals tended to do, but in those days Clarissa always used to criticise him for it: "Who's to say our world is more real than theirs?" I remember her demanding of him at one of the physical community's periodic gatherings.

The two of them on opposite sides of a large dining table laden with silver and cut glass. Terence declined to answer. Everyone in the room was willing Clarissa to shut up and let them return to their customary state of numbness. "Come on Terence, who's to say?" she insisted. "At least consensuals engage with life and with one another." She glared up and down the table. "And what do you think would be left of us if we stripped away everything that had come from outside ourselves, everything that other people had made? We'd be naked. We'd be gibbering imbeciles. Think about it. Even when we talk to ourselves inside our own heads, we use words that other people gave us."

But that was then. Now it seemed that Terence had been speaking all along on behalf of a side of Clarissa's own self.

"Don't look at me like that!" she'd scold the consensuals when they pointed and laughed at her, "You sold your true bodies for the illusion of youth and plenty, but I am real!"

Sometimes, in the middle of one of these rants, she would defiantly turn off her Field implant, making the people and

the traffic disappear from her view, houses become empty shells again and all the shop windows with their cheerful displays turn back into hollow caves: "I can't even see you, you know!" she shouted, knowing that the consensuals could nevertheless still see her, for sensors across the city pick up the sights and sounds and textures of everything physical and this becomes the matrix within which the consensual city is built. They had no choice but to see her. "I'm in the real world and I can't see you at all. *That's* how unreal you are. I can turn you off with a flick of a switch."

But though she might like telling the consensuals they didn't really exist, their opinion mattered to her desperately and she couldn't resist turning the implant on again to see what impact she was having. (I've never known anyone who turned an implant on and off as often as Clarissa did.) Almost invariably they would all be carefully ignoring her.

It was in these moments, when she had thrown a tantrum and discovered that no one was impressed, that things could get out of control. Once, a month or so before her trip to Piccadilly Circus, she found she could get no one to pay attention to her in the streets outside Walthamstow underground station. Rather than admit defeat, she insisted instead on going right down the stairs, arthritic and unsteady as she was, and waiting on the Southbound platform for a train. The platform emptied around her as the consensuals crowded up to the other end.

And then when the train came in, she promptly tried to step onto it. Of course she fell straight through onto the track, it being a virtual train, part of the Field, which couldn't bear physical weight, only the notional weight of consensual projections. She broke a small bone in her ankle. It hurt a great deal and she began to hobble up and down wailing for someone to help her up. The rules under which the Field operated meant that the train could not move off with her there. Yet she herself was breaking those rules. To the consternation of the passengers she appeared to them to be wading waist deep through the solid floor of the train, looking up at their averted faces accusingly and haranguing them for their lack of compassion: "Isn't there a single soul left in London prepared to help an old woman? Have you all lost your hearts as well as your bodies?"

Broken bones – and physical injuries in general – were completely outside their experience, so they would have had some excuse for not empathising with her plight, but actually they would have *liked* to help her, if not out of pure altruism, then out of self-interest. For she was holding up the train – not to mention the other trains behind it – and distressing everyone. Consensuals, unless they are destitute, are uniformly beautiful and, although they die at last, they don't age in the way we do. Spit never flies from their mouth. Snot never runs from their noses. Their make-up doesn't run or smear. It must have been truly horrific to see this dreadful wrinkled smeary creature wading up and down among them with its head at knee-height, like some kind of goblin out of a fairy tale. But what could they do? They could no more lift Clarissa back onto the platform with their consensual hands and arms, than the train could hold her up with its consensual floor.

So someone called the Hub, and the Hub put the word out to us in the physical community that one of our people was in difficulties and did we want to deal with it or should Agents besent in? Phone calls went to and fro. The physicals of London are like the members of some old dysfunctional family who have seen right through each other's limited charms, know every one of each other's dreary frailties, but who are somehow

chained together in misery.

"Bloody Clarissa. Have you heard?"

"Clarissa's up to her tricks again."

"Obviously we can't let Agents in. The real people have to deal with their own."

"Bloody Clarissa. How dare she put us in this position?"

In the end I was delegated to go up there with Richard Howard to sort it out. We travelled right across London and, since of course we couldn't use the virtual escalators, climbed slowly and stiffly as Clarissa had done, down the deep concrete staircase into the station. Clarissa was still stuck on the track. She had turned off her implant again, partly out of defiance, partly to avoid being overwhelmed by the agitated consensuals around her. But as a result she had lost the lights that the Field superimposed on the deserted and unlit physical station. For the last hour she had been stumbling around crying and wailing in pitch darkness with nothing for company except rats, and no sound at all except the drip, drip of water from somewhere down the southbound tunnel.

Richard and I had our implants switched on so as to be able to see what we were doing, and so had to endure the cold gaze of consensuals. They sat in the train watching as we clumsily extracted Clarissa from the floor; they stood on the platform watching as we dusted her down; they craned round on the virtual escalators to watch us half-carry her up the concrete steps.

"Look at those spooks!" someone in the street said, quite loudly, as Richard and I helped Clarissa into Richard's truck. "Look at the ugly faces on them! Haven't they got *any* self-respect?"

And there was a general hum of agreement. As a rule consensuals are scared of us Outsiders and our uncanny powers over the physical world. (Richard in particular is an object of awe, with his immense height, his great mane of white hair, and his tendency to walk contemptuously through virtual walls.) But we couldn't have looked very scary just then: two breathless old men, flushed and sweaty, helping a batty old woman with an injured foot into an ancient truck.

"Don't forget my car!" wailed Clarissa.

Somehow we manhandled her invalid car into the back of the truck. God knows why we agreed to take it. We would have been within our rights to say it was too heavy and left it behind. But Clarissa was powerful in some ways. She always had been. However much you might resent it, however much you told yourself that there is no reason at all to comply, it was hard not to do what she asked.

"Don't expect us to bale you out like this again," Richard told her as he bandaged her foot up back at her house. "Next time it'll be Agents."

None of us is sure what Agents really are, except that they are the servants of the Hub in the physical world. They have no visible faces. Their smooth heads and bodies are covered all over with a costume or skin in a special shade of blue which isn't picked up by the Field sensors, and is therefore invisible to consensuals. Some of us think they are simply robots of some kind, but others maintain that they are a new kind of physical human being, bred and raised apart from us for the Hub's own purposes. But, whatever they are, we fear them almost as much as do the consensuals, who only know of them by rumour and can only infer their presence from secondary clues.

"I couldn't have borne that," Clarissa murmured, "not Agents coming for me down there in the dark."

"Well it's your choice," Richard told her. "You get yourself in a fix like that again, and that's all the help you'll get."



ILLUSTRATIONS BY CHRIS NURSE

He had been married to her once, before the days of Terence. Absurd as it now seemed, they had once, briefly, been lovers, enchanted by the sheer fact of one another's presence in the world. And even now, absurdly, Clarissa attempted to defuse his anger by flirting with him.

"I know I've been a silly girl, Richard dearest, but I promise I won't do it again."

I'm thinking about what I wrote earlier:

"The rest of us took the position," I said, "that we didn't like having to deal with the consensual world, but it was sometimes a necessary evil . . ."

I'm imagining Clarissa reading that and snorting with derision.

"Would you prefer it then if there was just us and no consensual world at all?"

Actually that very thing is looking increasingly on the cards.

When the consensual cities were first established as a way of withdrawing human beings from an environment which they were about to destroy, it was decided that these virtual cities would be congruent with the old physical ones. There were three reasons for this. Firstly many people could only be persuaded to accept consensual status on the basis that they would still have access to what they still thought of then as the 'real world'. Secondly, it was thought important to allow consensuals to continue to be able to interact with those of us who bought an exemption from the dephysicalisation process, by paying the

enormous levy and by allowing ourselves to be sterilised. (In those days, after all, physicals and consensuals might be brother and sister, father and son, schoolmates, life-long friends . . .) And thirdly it was because the processing capacity of the Hub, though huge, was finite and a consensual world based on the physical one was less heavy on the Hub's resources than a purely invented one.

All three of those considerations have largely ceased to apply. The Hub has grown bigger, the physicals and the consensuals have grown apart and the consensuals have long since lost any sense of the physical world as being the 'real' one. So it would now be politically and technically possible for the Hub to decouple the physical city from the consensual one. In some ways this would be much easier than maintaining the status quo with its costly network of sensors.

But I suppose, if I am honest, that when I contemplate the possibility of waking up to a London where the implants no longer work, the consensuals can no longer be encountered and we are left on our own among the ruins, then I don't welcome it. In fact what I experience is a sense of dread, abandonment, isolation. I suppose I simply rationalise this feeling by saying that we need the consensuals for practical reasons, that their presence is a necessary evil.

I think Clarissa's promise held for all of two days before she was off in her car again. Within a week she was back in



Walthamstow, though she avoided the station and didn't make any scenes. Before the end of the month, she was charging up the battery for a major trip, right into the centre of London. And then she was off again in earnest, bumping and bouncing grimly along the road and stubbornly refusing to think about how far her battery would take her.

As ever she drove with her implant switched off. She saw empty houses, abandoned petrol stations, an empty road, badly damaged by years of frost. But once in a while she stopped for that hit she so constantly craved, that momentary burst of comfort and reassurance that came from switching on her implant and seeing a living city emerging from the silent ruins.

"I'm going down to Piccadilly Circus," she told the people outside a row of shops in Stoke Newington. "They used to take me there when I was a little girl, to look at the coloured lights."

The shoppers all turned away.

"I used to love those lights," she told a man outside a betting shop in Islington, "the way they rippled and flowed. All that electricity! All that lovely colour!"

"Why don't you go home, spook?" the betting man muttered as he hurried off.

"I expect they still have lights like that now, don't they?" she asked a young woman in King's Cross, "Not *real* ones obviously, but ones for you people to see?"

"Oh yes," said the young woman, whose name was Lily, "they're lovely lights in Piccadilly Circus, but they're *quite* real you know. They're not physical or nothing like that."

Lily was not very bright and was happy to be friendly with anyone. She had a simple round very low res face that was quite flat and looked like something from a cartoon strip. Consensuals could choose their own appearance and be as pretty and as interesting and as high resolution as their bank balances would allow, but some consensuals couldn't afford much in the way of looks – and Lily was very obviously poor. Her eyes were dots, her skin a completely uniform pink, her clothes mere slabs of colour and her smile a simple upward curve of the single line that was her mouth.

"I'm pretty sure they're not physical anyway," she said, in her tinny little low res voice. And then she realised she had been rude and the smile abruptly inverted itself into a downward curve of regret. "Oh dear. I didn't mean to say there was

something wrong with being – you know – physical. That came out all wrong."

"Oh don't worry. I get that all the time. And you're the first friendly person I've met since I left home."

Clarissa had opened a flask of coffee and, still sitting in her little car, she poured herself a small cup. It was mid-October, a fresh autumn day getting on towards evening, and she was beginning to feel the cold.

"My father took me to see the lights in Piccadilly Circus when I was a little girl. Apparently when we got there I asked him where the clowns and tigers were. 'And where are the pretty ladies in tights?' I wanted to know. He said it wasn't that kind of circus: 'Circus just means a circle for the cars to go round.' I don't remember that conversation myself, but I do remember standing there with the beautiful electric lights all round me and realising that I didn't care about the tigers and the pretty ladies. Colours are so magical when you are a child. I looked one way and then the other, but I wanted to see it all at once, so in the end I decided to spin round and round on the spot."

She lifted the coffee cup to her lips and took a sip.

"I'm Lily," Lily said helpfully, staring wonderingly at the intricate wrinkles all over Clarissa's hands, and at the brown liver-spots on them, and the way they trembled all the time so that coffee kept sloshing out down the sides of the cup. If Lily's low res looks were short on detail, Clarissa seemed to possess detail in reckless abandon. And yet – and this was the part that puzzled Lily – it was to no apparent decorative purpose. That look must have cost a fortune, Lily thought, but why would anyone choose to look like *that*?

"I'm Clarissa, my dear. I'm Clarissa Fall," said the old lady grandly, finishing her coffee and shaking the drips out of the cup before screwing it back onto the top of the flask.

"Do you know the way?" Lily ventured. "Do you know the way to Piccadilly Circus?"

"I should think so," Clarissa snorted. "I'm over two hundred years old and I've lived in London since I was born. I'm the last physical person left in London, you know." She looked at her watch. She craved company and attention and yet when she actually had it, she was always curiously impatient and off-hand.

"Oh. Two hundred," repeated Lily humbly. "That's quite old. Only otherwise I was going to suggest I could come and show

you the way . . ."

"Yes, do come by all means," said Clarissa magnanimously.

The laws of the physical universe prevented physical people from riding on virtual vehicles, but there was nothing in the rules of the Field to prevent virtual people from riding a physical car. The only difficulty was that the invalid car was only designed for one, so Lily had to ride at the back on the little rack intended to carry bags of shopping.

"I don't mind," said Lily, who couldn't afford dignity. "It's not that far."

"I'll have to turn my implant off, I'm afraid," Clarissa told her, "so I can see the bumps on the road. You won't be able to talk to me until we're there."

"I don't mind," said Lily gamely. She had no idea what Clarissa meant, but she had long since accepted that life was largely incomprehensible.

Clarissa turned the key to start the car. As she did so she noticed the meter that showed the remaining charge in the battery. When she set out, the needle had pointed to FULLY CHARGED, but now it was on the edge of the red area marked WARNING! VERY LOW!. She allowed herself for a single moment to see the trouble she was in – and to feel fear – and then she pushed it firmly from her conscious mind.

Clarissa drove slowly down Tottenham Court Road. The shop buildings were dark and empty, their windows blank, or sometimes broken and full of dead leaves. The roads were bare and strewn with rubble. Apart from the whine of her electric car and the click of stones thrown up by its rubber wheels, there was utter silence.

But Lily saw windows full of goods for sale, cars and buses all around them, and people everywhere.

"Nearly there!" she called out cheerfully, still not fully grasping that Clarissa with her implant inactivated couldn't hear her or sense her presence in any way. Then she gave a little shriek as Clarissa nonchalantly swerved across the road directly into the path of oncoming traffic and carried on down the wrong side of the road, magnificently indifferent to honking horns and shouts of indignation.

"She's physical," Lily called out by way of explanation from her perch on the back of Clarissa's little car. "She's just physical."

Half-way along Shaftesbury Avenue, the battery gave out and the car died.

And now Clarissa was scared. It was getting towards evening; it was turning very cold; and she was an elderly woman with an injured foot in the middle of a ruined city. She had nowhere to stay, nothing to eat or drink, and no means of getting home.

But Clarissa was good at pushing things out of her mind.

"It's not far," she muttered, referring not to the fake chateau, her distant home, but to Piccadilly Circus which still lay ahead. Piccadilly Circus offered no warmth, no nourishment, no resolution at all of her difficulties, but all of that was beside the point. "I'll just have to walk," she said. "It's absurd to come this far and not get to see it."

She dismounted from her car and began, painfully, to limp the last couple of hundred metres, but then she remembered Lily and stopped.

"I'M GOING TO WALK THE LAST BIT!" she bellowed back, assuming correctly that Lily was trailing behind her, but erroneously that Lily's invisibility made her deaf. "I CAN'T SEE YOU because MY IMPLANT'S TURNED OFF and I don't want to turn it on again until I get there, or it will SPOIL THE EFFECT."

She had it all planned out. She would not turn on her implant until she was right in the middle of the Circus.

"YOU'RE VERY WELCOME TO COME ALONG THOUGH!" she shouted, as if she personally controlled access to the public streets.

She hobbled forward a few steps along the silent ruined avenue (while in the other London, cars swerved around her, pedestrians turned and stared and Lily patiently plodded behind her as if the two of them were Good King Wenceslas and his faithful page).

"I'll tell you what though," Clarissa said, pausing again. Her face was screwed up with the pain of her injured foot, but her tone was nonchalant. "If you felt like calling the council and asking them to get hold of someone physical to come and help me out, I would be grateful . . . Only my dratted car has QUITE RUN OUT OF POWER you see, so it's not going to be able to get me back."

"I don't have any money," said Lily. "Is it an emergency do you think? Shall I call the emergency number?"

But of course Clarissa couldn't hear her.

It was getting dark as she limped into Piccadilly Circus. The buildings were inert slabs of masonry, all those thousands of coloured light bulbs on the old advertising signs were cold and still and the statue of Eros was more like the angel of death on a mausoleum than the god of physical love.

Some gusts of rain came blowing down Regent Street. Clarissa's lips and fingers were blue with cold and her whole body was trembling. (Lily was amazed: she had never seen such a thing, for consensuals are never cold.) Clarissa was in great pain too – the broken bone in her ankle had slipped out of place and felt like a blade being twisted in her flesh – and she was tired and hungry and thirsty. Too late she realised she had left her flask of coffee behind in her abandoned car.

"You're a fool, Clarissa Fall," she told herself. "You don't look after yourself. One of these days you'll just keel over and the rats will come and eat you up. And it will be your own stupid fault." Then she remembered her low res companion. "ARE YOU STILL THERE LILY?" she bellowed. "Did you make that CALL FOR ME? I'm just going to get across to the statue there and then I'll turn my implant on and WE CAN TALK."

She hobbled to the base of Eros and then reached up to the implant switch behind her ear. The colour, the electricity, the teeming life of a great city at night came flooding instantly into the desolate scene. There were people everywhere, and cars with shining headlamps and glowing tail-lights, and black taxis and red double-decker buses full of passengers, lit upstairs and down with a cheery yellow glow. But above all there were the lights, the wonderful electric streams of colour that made shining moving pictures and glittering logos and words that flowed across fields of pure colour in purple and red and green and yellow and blue and white.

"Ah!" cried Clarissa in rapture, "almost like when I was a little girl and the lights were real!"

"I told you they were lovely," Lily said, like a pet dog that will wait an hour, two hours, three hours for its mistress to glance in its direction, and still be no less grateful when the longed-for attention finally comes.

Clarissa turned, smiling, but the sight of Lily's cartoonish moon-face had an unexpected effect on her. She felt a stab of pity for Lily and at the same time revulsion. Her smile ceased to be real. Her pleasure vanished. She felt the bitter cold of the physical world pushing through, the needle-sharp physical pain

nagging at her from her foot, the physical ache in her head that came from tiredness and dehydration.

Lily sensed her change of mood and the simple line that represented her mouth was just starting to curve downwards when Clarissa switched off her implant again. Lily vanished, along with lights, taxis, buses and crowds. It was very dark and quite silent and the buildings were dim shadows.

"The thing is, Lily," Clarissa announced to the empty darkness, "that you consensuals are all just like these lights. Just moving pictures made out of little dots. Just pictures of buses, pictures of cars, pictures of people, pictures of shop windows."

Deliberately turning away from where Lily had been, Clarissa turned the implant on again and watched the lights come back. But there was no thrill this time, no exhilarating shock, nothing to offset the cold and the pain. It was no different really to changing channels on a TV set, she thought bitterly, and straight away reached up to flick the implant off again. But now the switch, which was designed to be turned on and off a couple of times a day, finally broke under the strain of her constant tinkering with it and refused to stay in one position or the other. Clarissa's perceptual field now flickered randomly every few seconds from the consensual to the physical world and back again – and she couldn't make it stop. She stood helplessly and ineffectually fingering the switch for a short time, then gave up and sank down to the ground at the foot of the statue. What else was there to do?

"Did you call up the council, Li –" she began, and then the consensual world disappeared. "Oh dear. LILY, ARE YOU STILL THERE? . . . Oh you are, good. Did you call the council only I think I ought to go home now . . . Lily? LILY! ARE THE COUNCIL GETTING HELP? . . . Tell them I don't want Agents' mind. Tell them to get some physicals out. They'll be cross with me, but they'll come anyway. I don't care what Richard said."

Actually, whether she liked it or not, Agents were coming, four of them, from different directions, from different errands in different parts of London. They were still some way off but they were on their way. The Hub had sent them, having contacted Richard Howard and been told by him that we physicals wouldn't come out again.

Later Richard began to worry about what he'd done and called me. "I know it seems harsh," he said, rather defensively, "but I do feel we've got to keep out of this, don't you agree? Clarissa's got to learn that when we say something we mean it, or she'll keep doing this stuff over and over again. I mean she's in *Piccadilly Circus* for god's sake! Even Clarissa must be perfectly well aware that she couldn't go into central London and get back again in that silly little car of hers. She obviously just assumed that we would come and fetch her. She just banked on it."

I was as furious with Clarissa as he was. I had spent the afternoon raking leaves and tidying up in my secluded little garden. I had just eaten a small meal and taken a glass of port and was looking forward to a quiet evening alone in the warm behind drawn curtains, making some preparatory notes for Chapter 62 of my book *The Decline and Fall of Reality*. (I had dealt in Chapters 60 and 61 with the advent of the Internet and the mobile telephone and was just getting to what was to be the great central set-piece of my whole account: the moment where the human race is presented for the first time with incontrovertible evidence that its own activity will destroy the planet, not in centuries or even decades but in years, unless it can reduce its physical presence to a fraction of its current levels.)

"Bloody Clarissa! Bloody bloody Clarissa!"

Why *should* I give up the treat of a quiet evening and a new chapter, when she herself had deliberately engineered her own difficulties? I absolutely dreaded going into the centre of London at any time, as Clarissa surely knew, and yet here she was calmly assuming that I could and should be dragged there whenever it suited her convenience. And yet I knew I had to go to her.

"I can't leave her to the Agents, though, Richard. I know she's a pain, I know we're being used, but I can't just leave her."

"Oh for goodness' sake, Tom, it'll teach her a lesson," Richard said, hardening in his resolve now he had my own flabbiness of will to kick against. "How will she *ever* learn if we don't stay firm now? It's really for her own good. And anyway, the Agents can't be called off now. You know what they're like."

"Well if they're going to be there anyway, I'd better be there too," I said. "They scare her silly. I'll drive up there now, so at least there's someone on hand that she knows."

I went out into the cold and started up my car. I resented Clarissa bitterly. I absolutely dreaded a reprise of the dark feelings that trips into London invariably churned up in me, the shame, the embarrassment, the feeling of loss, the envy, the deep, deep grief that is like the grief of facing a former lover who belongs now to another and will never be yours again . . . I was exhausted by the very thought of the effort of it all, not to mention the discomfort and the cold.

When I got to Piccadilly Circus, Agents were just arriving, one emerging from Shaftesbury Avenue, one from Piccadilly and one each from the northern and southern branches of Regent Street. But, huddled up under the statue of Eros, Clarissa couldn't see them, for when she was in purely physical mode it was too dark and when she was in consensual mode they were invisible. Beside her squatted Lily with her consensual arm round Clarissa's physical shoulder. Sometimes Clarissa could see Lily and sometimes she couldn't, but either way she could get no warmth from the embrace, however much Lily might want to give it.

As my physical headlights swept across the physical space, the first thing Clarissa saw was two of the Agents looming out of the darkness and advancing towards her. It felt like some nightmare from her childhood, and she screamed. Then her implant switched on by itself and the lights and the buses and the crowds returned to screen them out. But that was even worse because she knew that behind this glossy facade the Agents were still really there, slowly advancing, though now unseen.

She screamed again.

"Keep away from me, you hear me! Just keep away."

"Don't be scared, Clarissa," said Lily. "I'm here for you."

But Lily didn't have a clue. She had never experienced cold. She had never known physical pain. She wasn't aware of the presence of the Agents. She had no inkling of the other world of silence and shadow that lay behind the bright lights of Piccadilly Circus.

I got out of my car. I had my own implant switched on and I picked my way gingerly over the ground between me and Clarissa, knowing only too well how easily nasty physical potholes can be concealed by the virtual road surface. I was doing my best to ignore the many consensual eyes watching me with disapproval and dislike and I was seething all the while with rage at self-obsessed Clarissa for putting me through all this yet again. How dare she drag me out here into the cold night? How dare she expose me to the illusion of the consensual city and to the disapproving gaze of the consensual people, when I all I ever wanted was to be at home behind my high hedges

that I had cut into the shape of castle walls, behind my locked doors, behind my tightly drawn curtains, writing about reality.

"You know her do you?" a man asked me. "Well, you want to do something about her, mate. She's nuts. She's mental. She needs help"

I didn't respond. I had never known how to speak to these people, so manifestly unreal and yet so obviously alive. I both despised and envied them. How tawdry their constructed world was and how craven their meek acceptance of it. Yet how narrow and dull my own world was by comparison, my bleak garden, my clipped hedges, my book, my nightly glass of port, my weekly sally down the road to the Horse and Hounds, the Last Real Pub, to drink Real Beer with the diminishing band of decrepit and barren old men and woman who call themselves the Last Real People.

"She needs locking up more like," said a woman. "That's the same one that blocked the Northern Line last month with her carrying on. I saw her face in the paper."

I picked my way through the traffic.

"Alright Clarissa," I called coldly as I came up to her, "I'm here again for you. Muggins is here again as you no doubt expected he would be. I've come to fetch you home."

"Muggins? Who's that?" she quavered. She was afraid it was one of the Agents.

"It's just me, Clarissa. It's just Tom."

"It's who?" muttered Clarissa, straining to see me.

"He said Tom, dear," Lily told her.

Clarissa glanced sideways at the cartoon face with its little black dot eyes and its downward curved mouth. Then Lily vanished again, along with the whole Field, and Clarissa was back in the dark physical world. But the lights of my car were there now and, without the distraction of the Field, Clarissa could clearly see me approaching as well as the Agents around me, waiting to step in if I couldn't resolve things.

Awkwardly, wincing with pain, she rose to her feet.

"I just wanted to see the lights again, like they were when I was a child," she said stubbornly.

And then she began to spin round on the spot like children sometimes do in play, but very very slowly, shuffling round and round with her feet and grimacing all the while with pain. And as she revolved, the faulty switch on her implant continued to flicker on and off so that, for a few seconds the bright lights and the buses and the cars span around her, and then it was the turn of the darkness that was the source of her coldness and her pain, and it was the dim cold walls of the empty buildings that moved round her, lit only by the headlights of my car.

Lily appeared and disappeared. When she was there the Agents vanished. When she vanished, they appeared. The constant was me, who like Clarissa could both feel the physical cold, and see the consensual lights.

"Come on Clarrie," I said to her gently. "Come on Clarrie."

The old lady ignored me for a while, carrying on with her strange slow-motion spinning and singing a tuneless little song under her breath. People were craning round in cars and buses to look at us. Pedestrians were standing across the road and watching us as frankly as if this really was a Circus and we were there expressly to put on a show. Then abruptly Clarissa stopped spinning. She tottered with dizziness, but her eyes were blazing like the eyes of a cornered animal.

"Who are you?" she demanded. "Who exactly are you?"

It was odd because in that moment everything around me seemed to intensify: the sharpness of the cold night air in the

physical world, the brilliance of the coloured lights in the consensual one, the strange collision of the two worlds that my Clarrie had single-handedly brought about. . . . And I found that I didn't feel angry any more, didn't even mind that she'd brought me all this way.

I switched off the implant behind my ear, so that I could check up on what the Agents were doing. But they were still standing back and waiting for me to deal with things.

"It's me, Clarrie," I said to her. "It's Tom. Your little brother."

The Agent nearest me stiffened slightly and inclined its head towards me, as if I had half-reminded it of something.

"I reckon you've had enough adventure for one day, my dear," I told my sister, flicking my implant on again to shut the Agents out of my sight. "Enough for one day, don't you agree? Don't mind the Agents. I've brought the car for you. I've come to take you home."

She let me lead her to the car and help her inside. She was in a very bad state, trembling, bloodless, befuddled, her injured foot swollen to nearly twice its normal size. I was glad I had thought to bring a rug for her, and a flask of hot cocoa, and a bottle of brandy.

That strange moon-faced creature, Lily, a human soul inside a cartoon, followed us over and stood anxiously watching. "Is she alright?" she asked. "She's gone so strange. What is it that's the matter with her?"

"Yes, she'll be alright. She's just old and tired," I told her, shutting the passenger door and walking round the car to get in myself.

I flipped off my implant, cutting off Lily and the sights and sounds of Piccadilly Circus. In the dark dead space, the four Agents were silhouetted in the beam of my headlights. They had moved together and were standing in a row. I had the odd idea that they wished they could come with us, that they wished that someone would come to meet *them* with rugs and brandy and hot cocoa.

I got my sister comfortable and started up the car. I was going to drive like she always did without being able to see the consensual traffic. I didn't like doing it. I knew how arrogant it must seem to the consensuals and how much they must resent it – it was things like that, I knew, that gave us Outsiders a bad name – but I just couldn't risk a broken axle on the way home on top of everything else.

"Really we're no different when you come to think of it," said Clarrie after a while. Her implant was off and she looked out at abandoned streets as lonely as canyons on some lifeless planet in space. "That's the physical world out there, that's physical matter. But we're not like that, are we? We're patterns. We're just patterns rippling across the surface."

"Have a bit more brandy, Clarrie," I told her, "and then put the seat back and try to get some sleep. It's going to be some time before we get back."

She nodded and tugged the rug up around herself. Her implant switched itself on and she saw a taxi swerve to avoid us and heard the angry blast of its horn. Briefly the busy night life of the Consensual Field was all around her. Then it was gone.

"Just the same," she said sleepily. "Just like the lights in Piccadilly Circus."

This is Chris's eighteenth story in *Interzone*, the previous one being 'Monsters' in 2003. His most recent published story was 'We Could be Sisters' in *Asimov's*, Chris's debut novel, *The Holy Machine*, is available from Wildside Press (reviewed in this issue). Chris lives in Cambridge, where he now works as a lecturer at the euphoniously-named Anglia Polytechnic University.

LOVEGROVE'S REVIEW OF *GENE* WAS AN ENTERTAINING, INTELLIGENT BUT MERCILESS DISSSECTION

MIKE O'DRISCOLL



NIGHT'S PLUTONIAN SHORE

THE REVIEW WARS

What is the purpose of a book review? Most of us would probably agree that the primary function of the reviewer is to inform a book's potential readers about what they might expect, to give them some indication of whether or not this is a work they might enjoy. It seems a pretty straightforward task, and yet the topic has generated much heated debate over recent months within the genre community, culminating in the recent decision by *The Alien Online* website to cease reviewing. This followed James Lovegrove's damning review of Stel Pavlou's novel *Gene*, which appeared on the site in early March. Lovegrove's review was, apparently, an entertaining, intelligent but merciless dissection, one to which

Mr Pavlou took exception. The author fired off an embittered and rather foolish email to TAO publisher and editor Ariel, who commented on the matter in his weblog. After much discussion and feedback from contributors and readers, Ariel took the decision to remove the review and apologise to Pavlou. Although not the cause, the incident served as a catalyst for Ariel's long-pondered decision to stop publishing reviews on TAO. In addition to the demands that running the site has made on his time outside his paid work, he had finally had enough of taking the flak from aggrieved writers.

Even before the TAO incident, the subject of reviewing had prompted a whole swathe of genre commentators

to work themselves up into a right old frenzy. Reviewers' motives have been questioned – either they're pals with the writers whose works they're reviewing, or personal animosity has prompted a settling of scores in review form; there have been calls for reviewers to put their literary credentials on the table; it has been suggested that some genre publications carry only favourable reviews so as not to bite the hand that feeds them (in the form of advertising revenue); and, a bizarre one this, there has been much crap about not wanting to damage reputations and/or cause offence. In the case of the *Gene* review, it is not exactly clear whose reputation has been damaged or who has been most offended. It is difficult to see how one

damning review on a relatively small science fiction website, set alongside those positive reviews which appeared in more august and widely read forums, such as Peter Guttridge's review in *The Observer* (6 March 2005), could be any more damaging to Mr Pavlou than his own intemperate and peevish response to the former. Whatever the consequences for Lovegrove's reputation in having his review pulled, the greatest offence has been caused to the site's readers, who, it seems, cannot be trusted to make up their own minds about the book, but must apparently conclude that it is shit because Lovegrove has said so. Whatever happened to the notion of sceptical or contrary readers who, having prior knowledge of a critic's tastes, conclude that if this guy says a particular book is crap, then the chances are I'm going to like it? Many of us read more than one review of a specific novel, and our decision to purchase may depend largely on how closely attuned we feel to the tastes and sensibilities of a particular critic.

The question of a kind of an old pals' club among reviewers is a genuine concern but not one that is specific to genre reviewers. It happens outside science fiction and fantasy, and yet most readers of the *Guardian*, the *Times*, or the *Telegraph's* review pages don't seem unduly troubled by the sight of Julian reviewing Salman's latest work, or Salman picking over the bones of Ian's new tome, or Ian commenting on Martin's fabulous new collection. Irrespective of whether its 'literary fiction' or genre, some of our most perceptive critics will, inevitably be writers themselves. The crucial thing here is honesty, what John Clute calls a "Protocol of Excessive Candour." Clute maintains that dishonest reviewers are like cholesterol, damaging to the good health of the genre. Rather than trying to temper reviews out of a sense of friendship with the writer concerned, we should understand that harsh but truthful reviews promote the strength and vitality of the body of writing. In effect, they express "love: self-love; love of others, love for the genre." And if a reviewer is consistently truthful in her reviews, then readers will recognise that honesty and come to trust her judgement even if they don't always agree with her opinion. Clute is a good example. He's one of our best reviewers

and I trust his judgement implicitly. I've bought many books based on what he has had to say about them, but I disagree with the regard he has for the work of, say, Terry Pratchett, a writer whose charms are completely lost on me. Reviewers who make clear their disdain for hard SF or slipstream, are likely to find their opinions called into question if they suddenly lavish praise on such works in a review of a book written by a friend or close acquaintance. Similarly, I think that readers recognise that most apparent hatchet-jobs are born out of a frustration or dissatisfaction with the work rather than with its author. If personal animosity does occasionally mark a review, then it reflects more damagingly on the reviewer than on the author concerned.

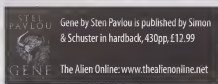
I have no idea what percentage of a SF magazine or website's revenue comes from publishers' adverts, but surely suspicions would be aroused by an endless succession of glowing reviews? The evidence from back issues of *Interzone*, and from numerous websites, indicates a broad spectrum of opinion within each forum, with no shortage of healthily sceptical reviews to sit alongside the more favourable. In fact entirely hagiographic reviews are not that common, with even the most effusive containing at least one or two critical qualifications. Regarding review columns like Peter Crowther's here, or Charles De Lint's in *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, which eulogise what their writers consider the good works while ignoring the bad, such a desire is entirely understandable. But should other reviewers then remain silent on all the crap they've had to endure so as to avoid recriminations? Or, as Jeff VanderMeer has suggested, if you're going to review a book and you find it disappointing, don't "you have a responsibility to tell readers the truth about it?"

As for literary credentials, surely the review itself will stand as evidence of the reviewer's ability to get to grips with a text, to be able to comment intelligently on its formal qualities and style, its themes, plot, characterisation and pacing, how it relates to similar genre texts, and its place in the author's oeuvre. Or, as one blogger recently suggested, should reviewers have spent years grappling with the canon of English literature and producing more

theses on *Finnegans Wake* to add to the already deconstructed mountain of such papers, before they're allowed to offer even the most humble comment on a work of science fiction? If so it must be, then the implications for music and film criticism should be interesting. Who will we get to take over Nick Lowe's column? Scorsese? Cronenberg? Maybe Renny Harlin has the right credentials? And over at *Mojo*, I can't wait to hear what Beyonce has to say about Tom Waits' most recent album. Where will it all end? I mean, if we're going down that road, then what right have we, as mere citizens, to comment on the performance of politicians? Surely we'd have a much finer and fairer system of government if, in the recent election, we all abstained from voting and left the whole shebang to those with the necessary credentials to pass judgement on each other? And just think how much better, how much more literary, darling, my latest triple decker high fantasy epic would be if all you jumped up little, unqualified oik reviewers were banned from writing about it.

Unfortunately for writers, most readers don't just read – they want to talk about what they've read. They want to hear what others think, they want to argue about whether this story is better than that one, or whether the new *Interzone* has the edge on the old one. Reviewing is an integral part of this whole discourse, and while individual reviews might be poorly written or – at the extreme end – more akin to a bloodsport, to try to curtail such activity, to question or deny the value of book reviews to readers and authors alike, is to diminish the whole literary enterprise. To return finally, to John Clute, he suggests that many writers are terrified of "genuinely attentive criticism," which they see as "akin to murder." He defines the kind of reviews most writers think critics should practice as "gospel singing," where we should merely "annunciate the name of the book and scam."

So, here in advance, is my review of the next epic fantasy to be sent my way – Hallelujah!



The K'fondi were driving Livesey and his BOOT team three stops past crazy, but that was not why the station chief hated me at first sight.

Mainly it was my record, which was laying itself out as Livesey tapped the panel of his desk display. I held myself at something like attention, set my lumpy features on bland, and looked over the chief's regulation haircut to where the window framed the unknown hills of K'fond.

"If Sector Administrator Stavrogin wasn't biting my backside, you'd never have set down on my planet," Livesey said, "but I promise you, Kandler, while you're attached to this establishment, you'll go by the book. Or I'll chase you all the way back to Earth and bury you in whatever stinking kelp farm you oozed out of."

There was more, but I had heard the like from the ranking Bureau of Offworld Trade field agent at just about every assignment I could remember. I was a foreign body in the Bureau's innards, a maverick among a tamer breed, tolerated only because I was also BOOT's best exo-sociologist. But whenever I was sent in, it was a sign that the field agent in charge was out of his depth. If I turned out to be the reason a mission was successful, a corresponding black mark went into the file of the BOOT bureaucrat who had screwed up.

They sent me in because I got results. But the day I stopped getting results, the uneasy symbiosis between me and the Bureau would fall apart. With luck, I might land at a Bureau training depot, lecturing batches of budding Liveseys on the intricacies of the ancient alien cultures they'd be rehearsing how to loot.

Without luck, I'd be back on Argentina's Valdés Peninsula, stacking slimy bales of wet kelp, just as my father had done until he wore out and died. So I kept my mouth shut through the chief's opening rant, and watched a gaggle of K'fondi boost each other over the station's perimeter fence. They frolicked across the clipped lawn like teenagers at the beach.

Livesey turned to follow the direction of my gaze, swore bitterly, and punched his desk com. "Security," he said, "they're back! Get them herded off station! Move!"

The aliens wandered over and gawked through Livesey's window, giving me my first look at K'fondi. They were the most humanoid race Earth had ever found. On the outside, a K'fond could pass for any fair sized, bald human who happened to be thin-lipped, large-nosed and shaded from pink to deep purple.

Closer examination revealed subtle differences in joints and musculature, but the K'fondi were a delight to those exo-biologists who argued that parallel evolution would produce intelligent species that roughly resembled each other. We could breathe what the K'fondi breathed, drink what they drank, eat what they ate.

No one knew what K'fondi were like on the inside, but there would be some major differences. For one thing, they were thought to lay eggs.

Security heavies arrived to coax the natives off the station. None of them seemed to mind. One departing visitor – even without breasts, she was slinkily female in an almost sheer gown slit on both sides from shoulder to knee – paused for a parting wave and a broad wink through the window.

Livesey leaned his forehead against the window's plastic and swore with conviction. "Tell me how I'm supposed to negotiate a trade agreement when they treat this station like some kind of holiday camp?"

"Is it just the local kids come to look around?" I said.

Livesey turned with a glare of bewildered outrage. "As far as I can tell, that was their negotiating team. Go get briefed."

Outside, the K'fond air was rich and unfiltered, the slightly

GO TELL

less than Earth-normal gravity added a spring to my step, and I headed for my quarters in a tingle of excitement. I loved the beginning of every new assignment, ahead of me a whole alien culture to explore. It was almost enough to let me forget that the Bureau of Offworld Trade would use my work to help pick the K'fondi clean.

I hated BOOT, but the Bureau was the only path to field experience for an exo-sociologist. It was an arm of the Earth Corporate State, the final amalgamation of the Permanent Managerial Class of multinational corporations and authoritarian regimes that had coalesced just as humankind took its first steps toward the stars.

For a bright boy who ached to escape from Permanent Under Class status, who thirsted to meet and encompass the strange logics of alien cultures, BOOT was the only game in the galaxy – and I'd played it my whole career.

Brains and a willingness to outwork the competition had taken me from my parents' shack through scholarships and graduate school, then out into the immensity on Bureau ships. Now, with a score of alien cultural topographies mapped to my credit, every new assignment was more precious than the last.

Soon, I would be ordered out of the field, sent to a plain but secure retirement back on Earth. I could settle into a university chair, write a textbook and train the next generation of bright boys and girls who would assist the Bureau in its beads-and-trinkets trade.

Beads and trinkets were Livesey's vocation, and it was an ancient calling. The Phoenicians started it off, tricking neolithic Britons into accepting a few baskets of brightly colored ceramics for a boatload of precious tin ore. Later, the Portuguese traded cloth for gold, the French and English gave copper pots for bales of furs, or worn-out muskets for manloafs of ivory.

Every planet had something worth taking: a rare element, a natural organic that would cost millions to synthesize on Earth, a precious novelty to delight the wealthy and powerful. And on each world the natives could use something Earth could supply.

If the aliens could have haggled in Earth's markets, they would have got fair value. But only Earth had lucked into the ridiculously unlikely physics behind the Dhaliwal Drive. As in the days of the Phoenicians, he who has the ships sets the price.

Earth's corporate rulers would have had no moral objections to conquest, but systematic swindling was far cheaper and the PMC were leery about arming and training the PUC. There was no Space Navy to eat up the profits from the beads and trinkets trade. For the aliens, and for me, it was just too bad.

My job now was to get a handle on K'fond culture, particularly its economics, and tell Livesey what technological baubles the locals would jump at. In my spare time before rotation back to the Bureau sector base, I might be able to work up a paper for the journals.

But the trade agreement came first. That was in the book, and the Bureau went by the book.

My quarters were in a row of standard-issue station huts. I threw my gear onto the cot and turned to the stack of data nodes on the compcom desk that was the only other furniture. I plugged in the first one and the screen lit up.

THE PHOENICIANS

STORY BY MATTHEW HUGHES & ILLUSTRATIONS BY STEFAN OLSEN



There was nothing remarkable about the report of the seed ship that had discovered K'fond. I speeded up the readout and skimmed the highlights. Unmanned craft passes by, drops robot orbiter, moves on. Orbiter maps surface and analyzes features until its programs deduce the presence of cities. Orbiter opens sub-space channel to Office of Explorations sector base and tells OffEx about K'fond.

Then OffEx base reports to headquarters on Earth, which commissions a K'fond file and copies it to BOOT. BOOT puts together Livesey's team and sends them from the nearest sector base to establish contact. Every step neatly marked by its own cross-referenced memo. By the book.

But the pages started falling out when Livesey's team tried contact procedures. I plugged in the project diary, saw Livesey bring his ship into orbit over K'fond. I checked the time code: given the slowness of bureaucratic response and the temporal dilation effect of the Dhaliwal Drive, about three standard years had elapsed since first discovery. And in those three years, BOOT's robot orbiter had somehow gone missing.

Things only got worse for Livesey. He ran out the ship's ears to eavesdrop on surface communications; all were intricately scrambled. He dropped clouds of small surveillance units; each stopped broadcasting shortly after entering the atmosphere. The book said his next option was a manned descent, and Livesey had already chosen volunteers when the ship's com received a signal from the surface.

In clear, unaccented Earth Basic, someone said, "Welcome to K'fond. You are invited to land at the site indicated on your screen. Please do not divert from the entry path we have plotted for you."

The com screen showed a map of the smallest of K'fond's three continents; a series of concentric circles flashed around the spot where Livesey was to put down.

I laughed. The terse prose of the official diary did not record Livesey's outrage when the cherished contact procedures were brushed aside. But I could imagine the chief's fear at making planetfall without a bulging file of information garnered from the ship's spy gear and the missing orbiter's surveys.

Livesey and three others had dropped down to a field several kilometers west of a K'fond town. The video showed a small crowd of aliens clustered around the shuttle. Then the scene shifted to visuals taken by the contact team as they emerged from the craft. I slowed the image speed and looked closely.

A dozen K'fondi of both sexes were coming toward me. No two were dressed alike, their garments ranging from flowing robes to close-fitting coveralls. One female wore nothing but a metal bracelet. I magnified her image; egg-layer or not, except for the absent navel, she looked scarcely less mammalian than many fashion models. I tracked to an almost nude male, and saw the pronounced sexual differentiation.

I thumbed the flow speed back to normal and saw what Livesey had seen. The K'fondi flocked toward the contact team like kids let out of school. The BOOT men were jostled and seized, and the camera showed one agent tentatively reaching for his needle sprayer. But the aliens were patently friendly and curious. They fingered the Earthmen's clothing, plucked at hair, chattering non-stop amid what looked much like human smiles and laughter.

It was like seeing a first contact between Europeans and the peoples of the South Pacific five hundred years ago. But that reminded me of what had been done to those long-gone dwellers in paradise by the 'civilized' visitors they had rushed out to welcome.

I looked at the glad K'fondi faces. "Hey, have we got a deal for you," I said to the screen.

The tapes of later contacts chronicled Livesey's descent into frustration. The K'fondi really did act like rambunctious teenagers on a holiday. And yet many of them showed what I thought were signs of aging. I flipped forward to one of the 'negotiating' sessions.

A chaos of K'fondi chattered around an outdoor table somewhere on the station. None of them spoke Basic, and Livesey was struggling to communicate through sign language and the few words of local speech the lingolab had identified. The K'fondi were not listening. Some were passing around a flask. One couple left off nuzzling each other to slide beneath the table, and began demonstrating the similarities of K'fond and human lovemaking. Livesey put his forehead to the table and groaned.

I speed-ran the other tapes, witnessing several more encounters between BOOT and the K'fondi. I didn't bother with the file of correspondence between Livesey and sector base; I could imagine the SectAd's memos advancing from neutral to querulous to plain nasty. If the chief didn't get results here fast, BOOT would demote him so far down the hierarchy he'd need a miner's helmet to find his desk.

Which meant he'd be leaning hard on me to get those results for him.

The problem was simple: the K'fondi didn't make any sense. They had a high-tech culture, and somebody on the planet could beam a message to an orbiting Bureau ship in a language no K'fond should have known. Yet the K'fondi who came on station acted like eighteenth century Trobriand Islanders on their day off.

The language puzzle intrigued me. I buzzed the station switchboard and was connected with the lingolab. The call was answered by a harassed man of middle years who introduced himself as Senior Linguist Walter Mtese. He gave me directions to his lab.

I stepped from my hut into a warm mid-afternoon. This part of K'fond seemed a mellow, balanced place. Temperature, humidity, even the light breeze were perfectly matched. An occasional cloud threw interesting shapes on the distant slopes, and the air was soft and good on my face. *A place to settle down in*, I thought. But that kind of thinking led nowhere. Earth law prohibited residence anywhere but where the state could keep an eye on you, and that meant Earth.

I cut between two storage huts and came suddenly face to face with the K'fondi Livesey had had thrown off the station a couple of hours before. I observed that they liked close physical contact on first encounter; in fact, it couldn't get much closer than the way the pink female snaked her arms around my neck. Her skin was smooth and hot – K'fond body temperature was equivalent to a human's raging fever. She smelled indefinably of fruit.

"*Jiao doh vuh?*" she inquired.

I tried to gently shrug off the weight of her arms. Physical contact between human and alien on first encounter can represent anything from a polite greeting to an indiscriminate appetite. The correct response was to try to imitate the gesture offered, according to the Bureau book. But as she pressed her chest against me and followed with her hips, I realized that going by the book this time would involve seriously violating several BOOT regulations.

With smiles and soft-voiced disclaimers, I disentangled myself and stepped back. The pink woman shrugged very humanly and said something to her companions, then they

all wandered around the corner of the building without a backward glance. Seconds later, I heard a human voice shout "Hey!" followed by a burst of K'fond giggles. Then the group came pelted back around the corner, pursued by two puffing guards. I flattened myself against the supply hut and let the chase roll by. The K'fondi were enjoying the game.

Walter Mtese wasn't enjoying the K'fondi, I found when I entered his lingolab. Mtese was pure Bureau. A pattern of commendations and certificates decorated his walls, testaments to the linguist's integration into the BOOT vice of the universe. But for a successful bureaucrat, Mtese looked a harried man.

"I think someone's playing an elaborate practical joke on us," he complained, as he hooked me up to the snore-couch. "These people get by with a vocabulary of under a thousand words, most of which have to do with sex, booze and bodily functions. Tell me how that's compatible with a technological civilization."

"How are they at learning Basic?" My voice sounded strange in the confines of the headpiece he was fitting over my ears.

"They don't learn anything," Mtese answered. "I spent a whole morning – that's six standard hours – trying to teach two of them ten words. I'd have had more luck training snakes to tapdance. Give me your arm, please."

I felt the hypo's aerosol coolness. Subjective time slowed as the drugs depressed selected regions of my nervous system while goosing others into hyperawareness. Around a tongue now grown larger than the head that contained it, I managed to speak.

"What does 'j'iao doh yuh' mean?"

Mtese snorted as he punched codes into the snore-couch controls. "It's the standard greeting between males and females, usually answered in the affirmative, and followed by immediate direct action. It's a wonder they've got the energy to walk."

The snore-couch's headset began murmuring in my ears, the drugs took hold, and Mtese and the lingolab evaporated into golden warmth as the machine flooded my neurons with incoming freight.

Back at my hut, I found that knowing K'fondish was no big help. As the last wisps of Mtese's chemicals effervesced out of my brain, I re-ran Livesey's encounter tapes. The linguist was right: K'fondish conversation was at the level of the street corner banter of good-natured juvenile delinquents – simple, direct, and highly scatological. If the alien who had spoken in Basic over the ship's com was one of the 'negotiating team', he was keeping his mouth shut.

Livesey's records and the lingolab had taught me all they could. The next step, by the book, was first-hand field contact. According to procedures, that meant encountering the natives under controlled conditions, on station ground, and guided by a welter of Bureau regulations devised by bureaucrats who had never left Earth. I saw no reason to repeat Livesey's failure. Besides, it was always more instructive to meet aliens on their own turf.

The transport pool guard refused me a ground car without an authorized requisition. He was still refusing as I wheeled a two-seater out of its stall and waved my way past gate security. The highway was wide, flat and empty. I urged the car up to cruising speed, took the center of the road, and headed east. Five minutes from the station, I reached under the instrument panel and pulled loose a connection. Now the car's location transmitter couldn't tell tales on me. I nudged my speed a little higher, and went looking for K'fondi.

The quality of this planet's technology was obvious in the agricultural zone on the town's outskirts. A house-sized har-

vester trundled through a field, collecting a nut-like fruit that emerged packed in transparent containers from the harvester's rear port. A flatbed truck with a grapple followed along, stacking the containers on itself in precise rows. Neither machine had an operator. In the distance, herd animals grazed near the shores of a lake that swept across the horizon to lap against the geometry of the town's central core.

The highway connected with a grid of local and arterial roads, and I met up with other traffic. Self-directed trucks and driverless transports neatly avoided my passage, or maintained pace with me at exact, unvarying distances. Then the traffic dropped away down side roads as the highway took me into the residential suburbs.

Neat houses of painted wood or colored stone were intermixed with towers faced in metal or glass. The town looked lived-in – I saw lawns that needed a trim, a fence that was giving in to gravity, and one cracked window mended with tape. It was only after a few minutes that I realized I wasn't seeing any K'fondi. The streets were deserted.

The emptiness began to play on my nerves. Field work can be dicey. Trampling on a society's direst taboos is so easy when you have no idea what they are.

Maybe this part of the town was forbidden, or this time of day had to be spent indoors. Maybe it was death to approach this place from the west. Maybe . . . anything. At the university, we'd all heard the story of the technician who'd casually swatted a buzzing insect. He had protested that he had not known that that particular species was 'sacred for the day', as the alien priests had apologetically proceeded to dismember him.

I finally found the K'fondi, lots of them, as I nosed the car out of a side street onto the lake drive. I was suddenly in a town square, beachfront and park all rolled into one, and it was the site of a fiesta that made Rio's Carnaval look like a Baptist church social. Knots of K'fondi surged in a cheerful frenzy through a crowd so dense it flowed like fleshy liquid. Some kind of music thumped and screeched loud enough for me to experience it as repeated *tumpa-tumpas* on my chest. K'fondi in a grab-bag of costumes bobbed to the rhythm or gyrated with flailing elbows along the edge of the mob. As I stopped the car, an eddy of the crowd swirled around me. One dervish began beating out a tattoo on the engine compartment, while a large female jumped onto the hood and began a dance that had various parts of her moving in several different directions at once.

More K'fondi joined her, making the car sag and groan on its suspension. I mentally ran through all the time-tested phrases recommended for first encounters, but with this crowd I realized that I might as well declaim Homer in the original Greek.

The car was rocking steadily faster, and common sense said it was time to bail out. The crowd swallowed me the way an amoeba takes in a drifting speck. Aliens pressed me from all sides, but none paid me any attention. My head seemed to shrink and swell with the sound of the music.

Way back in school, in an attempt to make us grateful that the ECS had rescued our world from self-destructive hedonism, they'd shown us images of rock concerts from the Decadent Period. What I was experiencing among the K'fondi must have been the kind of sheer fun those old DP mass gatherings had looked to be.

The music wound down to a last sub-sonic rumble and crashed in an auditory rain of metal. As the sound dwindled, I could hear voices again, even pick out words I now recognized. The crowd began to thin around the knoll. Some went splashing into the lake. Others drifted back toward town or into the trees



further up the shore. And some couples entwined arms and legs, sliding down each other to the ground.

I scanned the departing remnants of the crowd. A few metres away, I thought I saw the pink female from the station among a handful of K'fondi skirting the knoll. Or it may have been a complete stranger – learning to tell aliens apart can take practice. I hurried to catch up, fell in beside her, and touched her wrist. She turned without slowing, and regarded me with scant interest. “*fiao doh vuh?*” she asked, and my lingolab-educated brain translated the phrase as “Do you want to?”

“Do I want to what?”

She looked puzzled for a moment. “It’s just what people say.”

I said, “My name is Kandler. I’d like to talk to you.”

“Why talk?”

“Talking is what I do.”

Her shrug was almost human, and I took it as an acquiescence. “I want a drink,” she said, heading toward a row of low-rises bordering the park.

The K’fond bar could have blended into most Earth street-scapes, if you ignored the unusual colors of the patrons. When we had found seats at a table in the back that was crowded with her friends, I learned that the pink woman’s name was Chenna – no surname or honorific, I noted – and that the town was called Maness. Chenna’s friends remained anonymous. I could just barely hold her attention long enough to ask a question and receive an indifferent reply. Everyone else in the bar was enjoying the outpourings of a couple on a small stage, who were tooting some kind of flute that had two mouthpieces. I was thankful it was purely an acoustic instrument; my eardrums still hurt from the pummeling they had taken in the park.

A robot server brought us a round of drinks without being summoned. I sniffed the tall frosty tumbler, and recognized the same fruity aroma that had lingered around Chenna at the station. The concoction tasted sweet and dry. I waited a few moments to learn if I would be racked by intense pains or stop breathing. When nothing much happened, I judged the drink safe and took another sip.

By saying her name a couple of times, I got Chenna’s attention again, and posed a few more questions. No, she didn’t work, although it seemed to her that she might have once had some kind of job. She thought she hadn’t been in Maness very long, but it was hard to tell.

If Chenna was hazy on her own personal history, the rest of K’fond society was nonexistent to her. I couldn’t find a word in my new vocabulary for ‘government’, but I tried to phrase a question about who got things done on K’fond.

“Machines,” she replied airily, waving to the robot for another round. I drained my glass and reached for a second.

“But who tells the machines what to do?”

Chenna actually looked as if she was rummaging through her mind for an answer. But then she laid her cheek on an up-turned palm and said, “Who cares?”

I put away my exo-soc question kit and opted for passive observation. The bar was filling up. The flute players had given way to an *acapella* group that seemed to know only four notes, but the K’fondi happily sang along with them.

A male at another booth took some kind of cigar from a box on the table, and tried to light it with what looked like an elementary flint and steel lighter. When he couldn’t get a spark, he persisted in thumbing the device with increasing frustration. Finally, he slammed the lighter to the floor and followed it with the cigar.

I rose and retrieved the battered object. A quick examination showed that the screw holding the steel ratchet to its mount was loose. With a twist of my thumbnail, I tightened the screw, and flicked the action. A flame wavered on the wick. I doused the flame and put the lighter back on the owner’s table. The K’fond picked it up, flicked it alight, and pulled another cigar from the box. I received not even a glance as the alien blew smoke toward the stage.

Back at Chenna’s table a third round had arrived. I sipped and watched, and listened to the surrounding conversations. It was like Livesey’s contact sessions: a lot of laughs, and half the words spoken were the K’fondish equivalents of ‘hey’ and ‘wow’ and the details of amorous adventures.

The fruit drink tasted good, felt good inside. But I noticed that the room had now begun to expand and contract in rhythm with my own heartbeat. That made me laugh, which made me wonder why I was laughing so loud. Chenna was looking at me now; they all were. I found it odd when their faces were abruptly replaced by the bar’s ceiling, and I tried to figure out what the hard flat something was that was pressing itself against my back. Then the world turned black and gently fell on me.

“I’ve been reading your job description,” Livesey said. “It doesn’t say that an exo-soc steals ground cars, leaves the station without permission, and is found at the gate giggling and smelling like a fruit basket. At least you had sense enough to program your car to bring you back.”

I didn’t think now was the time to correct the chief. Time enough later to wonder how a K’fond could figure out which end of the ground car was the front – never mind how to program an offworld computer.

I had expected Livesey to chew me out, but the chief seemed to have passed through rage and frustration while I was still in sick bay. He was now settling into acid despair. He spun his chair away from me and gazed with helpless hate at K’fond’s hills.

“Actually,” he told the window, “you were more useful in a drugged stupor than you’ve been conscious. The bio-chem techs pumped some interesting stuff out of your stomach. It might make a decent anesthetic or a recreational lifter for the PMC youth market back home.

“Either way, it won’t be enough to save us.” Livesey swung back to face me. “As a purely formal question, I don’t suppose you learned anything worth knowing from your little jaunt?”

I had been asking myself the same thing since I had woken up, sore-throated from the stomach pump. The drug in the fruit drink left me feeling reasonably fine, and the part of my brain that lived to puzzle out alien social patterns had gone right to work.

“Yes,” I said. “Item one, that’s a real city over there, not a backdrop whipped up to fool us.

“Item two: the K’fondi who live there really live there. They’re not actors putting on a show for our benefit.

“Item three: their technology is at least equal to our best.

“Item four: the K’fondi we’ve seen couldn’t possibly have created that technology; they can’t even repair a simple machine.

“Item five: something funny is going on. There’s a piece missing from this puzzle, and if we can find it, or even figure out its basic shape, the rest of the pattern will fall into place.” Livesey grunted. “You’re as stumped as I am. We’ve been looking for that missing piece of information since we landed. You want to hear our working hypotheses?”

He didn’t wait for an answer but ticked off the options on

his fingers, "Maybe the K'fondi we see are the mentally deficient. Maybe they're just the pets of the real dominant species. Or the whole place is run by supercomputers their great-great-granddaddies built while their descendants have declined into idiocy. For all we know, they're just a planetful of practical jokers having a good laugh on us."

The station chief smacked the desk. "But, dammit, somebody gave me landing coordinates in Basic. Somebody is scrambling all microwave communications. Somebody knocked out the survey orbiter. And, having done that, our mysterious somebody has apparently lost all interest in us."

"You're wrong," I said. "Our mysterious somebody is very interested. He's hanging back and watching. And if he won't come to us, we'll have to go find him. And by 'we' I mean me."

"Go ahead," Livesey snorted. "Take all the time you want, so long as you're finished in the next week."

"A week? This could take months. I've got to . . ."

"You'll be finished in a week," Livesey interrupted, "because I'll be finished in a week. That's when SectAd Stavrogin arrives. Here's the signal." He waved a flimsy at me. "I'm being demoted and shipped back to Earth, as soon as Stavrogin settles in. And, Kandler, I'm taking you with me. Under arrest."

"What, for appropriating a ground car?"

"No, I'm sure I'll think of something better. And, between my remaining authority and your record, I'll make it stick."

"But why?"

"Because I don't like you," Livesey spun back to the window. The interview was over.

I couldn't just lie on my bunk and wait for Stavrogin. I re-ran the diaries, looking for some clue, some insignificant piece of data to ring the alarm bells in my unconscious. I had a nagging sense that I was missing something that would make it all fit together.

But I saw nothing that helped, just more frolicking K'fondi, more remote scans of distant cities, too far away for any detail. Livesey's orbiting ship was not equipped for close-in scan; the exploration orbiter was supposed to be there to handle that chore, with ultrasopes that could count the blades of grass in a square meter of the planet's nightside from fifty kilometers up. But the orbiter was gone, and since – according to the Bureau's book – it was impossible for an orbiter to be gone, there was no provision for getting another one. Maybe Stav-rogin would have the clout to get a new high-orbit probe. And maybe I would read all about the solution to the K'fond puzzle back on Earth – if a newspaper ever blew over the fence of the punishment farm.

I paced and considered the situation. The K'fondi had put the station where they wanted it. All attempts to surveil other parts of the planet had been stopped. So, whatever they were hiding must be somewhere down the road from Maness.

Which meant taking a trip down that road and looking around. A ground car or flyer would probably bring me into hard contact with whatever had knocked out the spy drones. And if the K'fondi preferred to shoot first and sift the wreckage later, I would end up in some alien coroner's in-basket. But there was another way: risky, but I thought it just might work.

Then I paced out my own situation. If Livesey meant to sweeten the bitter taste of his failure by kicking me into prison, why should I spend my last days of freedom helping the Bureau?

If I solved the K'fond mystery, Livesey would still probably go under; even last-minute success couldn't divert BOOT discipline once it was wound up and set loose. Livesey, falling, would use

me as something soft to land on. Livesey, saved, would ruin me out of sheer spite.

But I wouldn't be doing it for the Bureau or the chief. This was for *me*. I had always had to know what made alien societies tick, and if making the pickings easier for ECS's interstellar swindlers was the price of that knowledge, then it was a price I was at least used to paying.

Before I was dragged off K'fond and chained to a bulkhead, I wanted to know what the hell was going on.

Five minutes later, I walked into the supply hut and began pulling things off the shelves. The quartermaster clerk decided he had better things to do than to ask questions of an eco-soc with a reputation for lunatic behavior. In the medical stores I found an antiseptic wash that dyed the skin. A jump suit stripped of its Bureau insignia would pass at medium range for a K'fond coverall. I scooped up a belt and pouch, which I filled with rations, depilatory creams, and some other useful items. Finally, I took a geologist's hammer to the arms locker and selected a small pulser that tucked into the palm of my hand.

The motor pool guard was prepared this time to stand his ground when a purple Kandler climbed into a surface car. But the pulser's output end convinced him to decamp quickly enough to avoid being run down.

On the open road, the wind of the car's passage chilled my newly bald head. Where I began to meet Maness's automated local traffic, I turned at the first major intersection and drove on for a couple of kilometers. I parked the car on the side road's grass border, pulled out the connections on the com panel to stop its annoying chirping, and settled down to watch the robot trucks go by.

Before the long K'fond day drifted into evening, I spotted the kind of transport I had been looking for. But, fully loaded, it was outward bound. I marked its size and characteristics, and was able to identify the same kind of vehicle heading empty in the direction of Maness. I put the car back on the road and followed.

The empty truck wove through an increasingly dense grid of industrial streets. Here there were no houses, and apparently no K'fondi were needed to run the automatic factories. The truck pulled into a side street leading to a low-rise, open-sided building. By the sound and smell of the place, I knew it was what I was looking for.

I slowed the car to a crawl as it bypassed the street the truck had turned onto. Pushing a few buttons on the car's console told it to go home and it whirled away, leaving me alone on the empty street.

It was now full dark, and the K'fondi hadn't bothered with many streetlights in this part of town. Keeping to the abundant shadows, I crept around the rear of the building where the truck had gone. The vehicle was nudged up against a loading ramp, behind which was a corral full of tapir-like creatures with curly horns and sad, muted voices. By the ringing in my ears, I judged they were being induced into the trucks by some kind of general sonic prod. No herders, either live or robot, were in sight.

That made it easier. I hopped the corral fence and stooped to hide among the cattle. Gritting my vibrating teeth against the sonics, I bulled my way up a ramp and into a slat-sided transport. The animals stamped and brayed at my smell; for me, the feeling was mutual. Inside the truck, the sonics were damped. I crouched in a rear corner.

The truck soon filled. Its rear gate swung closed, and the engine murred through the floorboards. The vehicle jerked forward,

sending a set of horns scraping across my back. It turned to exit the stockyard, and then it stopped.

I held my breath. Were sensors in the truck reacting to my shape or size or the smell of my sweat? Would alarms suddenly ring, floodlights sweep toward me, robot cops come to hustle me off to the interrogation rooms? But then the engine coughed and, with another lurch, we were mobile again. A few minutes later, I was rolling out of Maness. My compass told me we were heading north.

The chill bars of first light through the truck's slats brought me awake. I had spent the night in a hay-filled corner, pressed by warm bodies, and dozing despite the cattle's tendency to snore. I got up, stretched, and peered out at the suburbs of a city. It could have been Maness, except that it was bigger, lacked a lake, and was built half-way up a mountain range that rivaled the Andes. By my rough reckoning, I was five hundred kilometers from the station. I should be out of any K'fond quarantine zone.

The truck was now well into the city's industrial district. Time to move – my fellow passengers might be heading directly for the whirring blades of an automated slaughterhouse. I climbed the truck's side and sliced through its fabric top with a knife from my belt pouch. I boosted myself up and out, clinging now to the outside of the vehicle. I lowered myself until my feet dangled over the pavement blurring along below. When the truck slowed for a curve, I hit the street running.

Seconds later, I was your average K'fond, purple and bald, taking an early morning constitutional through the city's empty streets. A broad avenue led down toward the heart of the city, and a half-hour's walk brought me into a grid of residential streets. In a postage-sized park near a high-rise complex I found enough undergrowth to keep me out of sight. I'd lie low until the K'fondi came out of their homes, then blend in with all the other purple and pink inhabitants.

I ate some rations behind a screen of fern-like plants and watched for pedestrians. About the time the morning chill began to fade, a naked K'fond child – the first I'd ever seen – came out of a high-rise and walked down the footpath to stand by a striped post. Another approached from up the street, then several more. *Bus stop*, I thought. And the long passenger vehicle that soon came to pick the children up must be a school bus. As it left, more children arrived to wait for the next one.

So far, I had seen no adults, but with the K'fond commitment to partying, sleeping late would be normal.

As the third busload of children rolled away, there was a noise behind me. I turned to see three kids entering the park from the opposite side. Naked as all the others, these wore belts and holsters carrying lightweight toy weapons. *Playing cops and robbers*, I told myself, and hunkered lower behind the ferns. I didn't want to be taken for a K'fond child molester.

I could hear them approaching, talking rapid-fire K'fondish too fast for me to catch the meaning. They seemed to be passing my hiding place without noticing me. I held my breath. Then the ferns parted right in front of me, and I was crouching eye to eye with one of the kids.

"Uh, *jiao doh vuh?*" I tried.

"Oh, I really don't think so, Mr Kandler," the child replied. "No adult would say that to a child, even if they weren't all biologically set to keep their distance from us." It took me a few moments to realize that I was being spoken to in clipped Earth Basic, and that the weapon leveled at my face was no plaything.

The child gestured with the gun. "This is a device we use on adults who pose a danger to themselves or others. It's harmless

to them, but we're not sure how effective it would be on your nervous system, so it's set at maximum. I advise you not to do anything unreasonable."

As the child spoke, his two companions came through the undergrowth to triple the number of weapons now surrounding me at a discreet distance. Moments later, face down in the K'fond soil, I was efficiently stripped of everything but my jumpsuit. Then the children herded me out of the park and into a nonsense vehicle that had pulled up at the curb. I had the last of the three rows of seats to myself. The kids sat forward, facing me with weapons aimed.

"I suppose my disguise was pretty obvious," I said.

One of them replied, "The disguise was fine. At first we thought an adult had wandered into that meat transport. Then we took a closer look when you were on the road. But you could never have blended in here."

"Why not?"

For answer, the child waved at the cityscape unrolling beyond the car's windows. What I saw told me that, of course, they had to have spotted me immediately, disguise or not. To blend into this city's population, I would have had to make myself over as a small, pink, sexless doll with big eyes. The streets were full now, and not one of the K'fondi was an adult. It was a city of children.

"Where are you taking me?" I asked.

"To a place where some of us will talk to you."

I couldn't read the inscription on the building we arrived at, but it had government written all over it. The council chamber I was ushered into could have passed for the ECS seat of power in Belem – if everything hadn't been half-sized. But there was nothing diminutive about the authority of the K'fond children gathered around the gleaming, crescent-shaped table. I knew power when I met it.

They gave me a large enough chair and sat me down in the middle of the space enclosed by the crescent. For a few seconds, the K'fond world council looked me over in silence. Then the child at the center of the table's arc leaned across the glossy expanse. The voice was thin, but I didn't doubt the note of command it carried. "Welcome to K'fond, Mr Kandler. We've been looking forward to meeting you. Your personnel record told us more about the Earth Corporate State than a month's sub-space communications."

"You've read my record? But how?" – then I got it – "You've been using the survey orbiter's com link to listen in."

"True, Mr Kandler. We went up and got your probe shortly after it alerted your sector base. We don't mind telling you, its technology fascinated our scientists. And of course we were overjoyed to learn that interstellar travel is in fact possible.

"Which brings us to the point of our meeting. Mr Kandler, what can you tell us about the Dhaliwal Drive?"

Three days later, the station com center received and recorded a signal from the project's missing exo-soc. I reported that I had penetrated to the core of K'fond society and was 'making progress'. Then I signed off without waiting for a reply. It was my last direct communication with the station.

Two days after that, Sector Administrator Stavrogin arrived to take charge.

If Livesey was everything a by-the-book Bureau chief should be, then Yuroslav Stavrogin was a sector administrator to delight the book's authors to the lowest flake of their flinty

hearts. Pinch-faced and slim, with the eyes of a bored shark and the delicate hands of a Renaissance poisoner, he perched primly on the edge of a K'fond chair and waited. Beside him, Livesey looked nervously around the alien reception room and sweated. Through the open window came the sounds of Maness at play.

I watched through a concealed aperture as the brass cooled their heels. I remembered Stavrogin. Back at sector base, he had once made me rewrite a lengthy field report from scratch – a week's pointless work imposed on me for no discernible reason. When I was bold enough to ask why, he had coolly replied, "Because you need to be reminded of who I am, and of what you are not."

I closed the spy hole, picked up my new briefcase, and stepped through the door. Livesey's face opened in surprise, but Stavrogin knew better than to show his. Still, I was not what he had expected.

Yesterday, with the station in an uproar over the sector boss's arrival, a signal had come in. In clear Basic, a K'fond voice had specified that Livesey and Stavrogin, identified by name and rank, were instructed to present themselves at the Maness district office of the planet's government. Once again, detailed directions followed, and these had led the two Bureau officers to the building. A robot majordomo had shown them to the reception room and left them to stew a while. And then in walked their missing exo-soc.

"Kandler, where the hell have you . . ." Livesey spluttered, but was cut off by a mere lifting of Stavrogin's finger.

"Specialist Kandler," rustled the dry voice, "we can plot your recent itinerary later, but we are shortly to meet the K'fond trade negotiator. You will therefore advise us forthwith of the results of your fieldwork."

There was a desk and chair. I walked over and sat down. From my briefcase, I pulled a sheaf of paper and tossed it onto the desk. "My report," I said. "I won't give you the full details now; you can read it at your leisure. I'll just summarize."

"The K'fondi are a highly sophisticated culture, with a well advanced technology. They have been a unified planetary state for some centuries, long enough for the administrative apparatus to evolve into a kind of cooperative anarchy."

Stavrogin sniffed, but I elected not to notice.

"They are very interested in trade," I continued, "a great deal of trade, but only on rational terms."

Livesey burst in. "They're as rational as a bunch of spacers on Cinderella liberty. Drunken, fornicating . . ."

"Oh, those are just the adults," I laughed. "I'm talking about the kids."

Stavrogin's voice could have cut glass. "Tell it."

I leaned back in my chair, and put my feet on the desk.

"Well, it's that missing piece of information we were looking for. K'fond adults really are just about as useless as Livesey says. All they want to do is enjoy their retirement and make more little K'fondi. The eggs are almost a by-product, since they don't even tend their offspring after they're weaned."

"But the kids do all right," I continued. "Childhood is long here, very long. K'fondi reach intellectual maturity quite early, but puberty doesn't come along until thirty or forty years after. And they have drugs to hold their glands in check for another decade if they want to keep putting off sexual maturity."

"That gives them a whole working lifetime without distractions. They don't waste their youth in adolescent turmoil and fruitless rebellion, because adolescence comes at the end of life, not the beginning. They aren't bothered by sex or any of

its complications, like jealousy or getting up to change diapers. The infants are cooperatively raised by older children."

"And when their glands finally get to them, and the hormones reduce their mental acuity to the level of alley cats, they settle into a place like Maness: a retirement community out in the country, with plenty of beds and bars. A few children stick around to patch up cuts and bruises, and protect the newborns until they can be shipped off to the nurseries."

Livesey snapped his fingers. "They're like those extinct fish, the ones that didn't mate until they were ready to die. What were they called?"

"Salmon," I said. "We didn't figure it out because the K'fondi made sure we didn't see their cities full of children or the few kids around Maness. So we kept looking at it from our own perspective, from the chicken's point of view."

"Chicken?" asked Livesey.

"Sure," I said. "To a chicken, an egg is just a means of getting a new chicken. But to an egg – or to a K'fond child – an adult chicken is just something you need to get a new egg."

"Fascinating in its place," Stavrogin cut in, "but we are about to negotiate a trade deal. You will advise."

I smiled. "Sorry, Mr Sector Administrator. Appended to my report is my resignation from the Bureau, and appended to that is my surrender of citizenship in the Earth Corporate State. And these," I produced a document covered in cursive K'fondish script, "are my credentials as adviser to K'fond's economic committee. Shall we open negotiations?"

"You can't do that," Livesey said.

"He has done it," Stavrogin said, "though much good it will do him. Very well, 'Mr Adviser' Kandler, you may rot among your alien friends in this backwater. But trade – if there is even to be any trade – will be on Bureau terms; only Earth has the Dhalwai Drive."

I smiled. "Not for long, Stavrogin. These people – my people, now – have had near-space travel for generations, but until now they've had nowhere to go but up and down. They've always dreamed of reaching to the stars, but didn't know how or even if it could be done. The survey ship's passage answered the second question; and I had enough of a layman's grasp of the Dhalwai Drive to sketch an answer to the first."

I put my hands behind my head and stretched back in my chair. "They're smart and they have no distractions – they'll roll out a prototype starship within a year."

Stavrogin's face went paler, while Livesey's grew dangerously red. I held up a hand to forestall an outburst.

"We may decide not to deal with the ECS," I said. "After all, there's a whole galaxy of civilized races that the Bureau has been robbing. I'm sure they'll be interested in what we have to offer."

Livesey looked to be on the verge of detonation. But Stavrogin was struggling to recover. "I'm sure we can come to some mutually satisfactory understanding," he said. "As you say, there's a whole galaxy dependent on the trade made possible by the Drive. There's still plenty for both of us."

"You don't understand." I took my feet off the desk, leaned over its polished surface, and said, "Go tell the Phoenixians: beads and trinkets won't cut it any more."

"K'fond's main export will be starships."

Matt's latest sf novel is *Block Brillion* (Tor, November 2004, reviewed in IZ197), the third in the Archonate series. The first two were *Fools Errant* and *Fool Me Twice* (Warner Aspect, 2001), collected as *Gullible's Travels*, (SFBC 2001). He was born in Liverpool but has lived almost all of his life in Canada. His web page is at www.archonate.com.

Priate Joseph G. Brown arrived with the supply drop on December 23rd, 1944, the eightieth December 23rd we'd had since the sim's ninth version had launched. The sky was clear for the first time in days, and most of the non-awares had been wondering if we'd ever get resupplied, but in fact the drop came right on schedule. Just as Corporal Form and I hobbled in from the line, the C-47s growled across the sky above Bastogne to disgorge desperately needed supplies and ammunition. It was a beautiful sight and it never lost its impact, the sky raining life, plasma and morphine and blankets and food, a reprieve of *matériel*.

It was then that the data streamed into my head: a new arrival would be jumping in with the supplies. The information came as a surprise, since we'd never had a vircher begin their tour in Bastogne, certainly not during the siege. But it only took a second for the history to upload. I now had a full bank of memories about Private Brown, from training in the States to the troop-ship to England to the Normandy invasion. As far as we were all concerned, Private Brown had been a member of X Company, 101st Airborne, since the very beginning.

Form and I stood watching as the last plane shot past, and Brown emerged, a low drop right over the city, risky stuff. His parachute deployed and he slipped skilfully to avoid the buildings, aiming for the middle of the street.

"Who the hell's that, sarge?" asked Form, urging me to keep going. We were evacuating him for trenchfoot again.

"I think it's Brown," I said, helping Form traverse the muddy road.

"Brown?"

"Skinny guy, kinda quiet," I said, watching as Private Brown landed awkwardly in a mud puddle. His chute flapped down too close to a passing civilian, who jumped away in surprise. "Took one in the leg in Holland."

"Oh yeah," Form said, shaking his head. "Shit, what's he in such a hurry to get back for?"

"Maybe he went AWOL from the hospital," I suggested. It was the kind of heroic stunt most tourists programmed for themselves.

Unlike me, Form was a non-aware, and he exhaled loudly in disbelief. "He's fucking crazy!"

"No arguments," I said. "Come on, let's get you inside."

I left Form in the aid station, then went outside intending to head back to the line. Before I got anywhere, Lieutenant Upgrade shouted at me from across the street. "Sergeant Glitch!"

I altered my course and headed over to him. Upgrade was tall, lanky, and irritating, a non-aware officer. He uttered danger shrewdly while ordering his men about with utter disregard for their safety, reveling in every privilege of rank. He ran X Company's second platoon, and we all hated him, even those of us not under his command.

Standing next to him was Private Brown, and he looked meek and amiable. He was already shivering from the cold, but compared to the rest of us he looked fresh as a daisy. He smiled as I approached.

"Glad you could join us, Brown," I said, shaking his hand as I arrived. "You got a screw loose or something?"

"I didn't want to get reassigned," Brown said.

Upgrade, clearly unimpressed by Brown's initiative, got down to business. "He was in your squad, wasn't he? Get him up to the line."

"Yes, sir," I said, to Upgrade's retreating back. I tried not to show it, but I was a bit taken aback. Normally the data upload would have notified me that Brown was in my squad, or that I would be involved *at all* with his virch, for that matter. For some reason, it hadn't done so this time. Something was wrong.

Brown watched Upgrade leave. "Nice to see you again, sarge," he muttered through a grin.

I clapped him on the shoulder. "Well, some of us are glad to have you, anyway. That was quite an entrance."

"Thanks," Brown said, as we made our way up the street. He was wide-eyed, taking it all in, a combination of awe and disgust coloring his features as he took in the decimated buildings and stacked, frozen corpses. I suspected he'd never experienced a war, its violent death and wanton destruction; it was part of his grim fascination, the reason they 'came back' to Bastogne in the first place. His expression had that sad, amazed cast I had seen from so many other tourists, that such horrible things could have ever happened. And, really, he hadn't even seen much yet.

We made our way out into the woods to X Company's sector, tromping over snow-covered ground, while I described the situation, playing the tough, hardened sergeant. He absorbed it all silently, face inscrutable. When I finished my spiel he pulled a pack of Lucky Strikes out of his musette bag, and extended it toward me. "Holy shit!" I said, taking it eagerly. One of the battalion intelligence officers, Captain Applet, had told me that this reaction to Luckies was programmed into me, but knowing that never quelled my enthusiasm. "We never get these!"

"Yeah, I got an eyeful of rear echelon in Holland," Brown said. "They horde the good stuff." Something he'd learned in the histories of his time, probably. "Thought I'd bring some for the guys."

"You're gonna score a lot of points," I said, opening the pack. Which was, of course, why he'd brought them. Tourists from the 'future' wanted to gain our respect, ingratiate themselves, feel like they were a part of something. They were deeply impressed by the men who had fought the war and they wanted to be like them. Or at least, like the virtual versions of them that populated this program. It was all old hat, so far, except for the incomplete upload.



"Damn, it's cold!" he said a moment later, and I could tell he meant it.

"You're complaining to the wrong person," I said, lighting one of the Luckies.

"Sorry, sarge, it's just . . . I don't think I've ever *been* so cold before."

I laughed. Of course he hadn't. "You got here on a *good* day."

He smiled weakly at this, but I could tell he couldn't imagine it being any colder, and as I observed him during the rest of our hike I realized that he genuinely *looked* cold, *looked* as though he was really feeling it. The crazy thought occurred to me that perhaps, unlike most of the tourists we hosted, he hadn't programmed his simulated self for superhuman resistance to cold or to hunger, that he hadn't tailored himself for perfect physical fitness. Maybe he had wanted his virch to be more 'real' than the average tourist. But if that were the case, why hadn't the upload informed me of it? Something was . . . off.

"What's wrong, sarge?"

I shook my head and drew on my cigarette. Maybe I was living up to my name.

There wasn't a unit in the simulation that didn't think it was the best unit in the division. But those of us in X Company *knew* we were the best. This wasn't an unusual feeling, or so I'd heard, in the actual military of the mid-twentieth century. But here in the simulation, it was incontestable, at least to those of us who were aware.

The difference was all in the programming. The actual, historical companies of the 101st were populated by simulations of the men of the past who had actually fought in the Bulge, from General MacAuliffe right down to the lowest-ranking GIs. But the fourth battalion – consisting of us, Y and Z companies, and Battalion HQ – was entirely fictional, populated by a combination of aware and non-aware troops as well as the odd observer from system programming. Virchers who opted for 'service' in companies Able through Item generally benefited from the historical accuracy of those conflicts, and could tailor their experiences to avoid the true dangers of the war. They wanted to witness events, participate in their way, perhaps, but not truly experiencing anything. The life of the fourth battalion, on the other hand, was as random and hazardous as it got, and X Company in particular was one of the most dangerous units to join. In the military vernacular of the virch, X Company was known as 'Xylophone Company', but us awares always thought the x stood for the variable in the equation.

In eighty sequences, I'd been killed twenty-six times, wounded forty-four times, come down with trenchfoot thirty-three times, dysentery a dozen, and pneumonia ten; sometimes combinations of the above. And that wasn't even a bad track record, by X Company standards. There were two non-awares, for example, Private Idaho and Private Party, who were obviously programmed for incompetence. They bought it every time, endlessly looping a hopeless track, green replacements who had joined up after Market-Garden.

It was all luck, in X Company, all chance, with the cards stacked against you – just as it had been for the actual soldiers who had fought the actual war, all those years ago. Virchers in our company never knew what was coming, never knew what hit them. Foreknowledge of history was useless, because ours was an imagined, fictional history, not a truly 'real' one.

The high-risk nature of our outfit was no secret to the tourists who joined us. It really said something about Private Brown that

he had selected our unit for his virch. He wasn't looking to be an awed observer of history. What he wanted was to feel what those men had felt, the fear and cold, the pain and death and uncertainty . . . all in the context of his own unique experience.

It was a wonder X Company got any volunteers at all. Even a jaded subroutine like me had to be a little bit impressed.

On Christmas, a bitter cold, foggy day never worth celebrating, I was hunched in my foxhole when Captain Applet arrived. I was eating K rations with quivering hands, damning the programmers for making my situation so realistic, when he slid into the hole next to me. "Hey, Glitch."

"Captain," I said. Applet was an aware from Battalion HQ, the S-3, a stocky, blond-haired guy and a quick-witted officer. I liked him but I always dreaded his arrival. If he wasn't here to tell me I was about to be shot at, he was certain to have a new theory about our situation. He'd been hearing voices in his head since the fourteenth iteration, voices he was convinced came straight from one of the virch programmers. It had taken him a while to determine that he wasn't crazy, that someone from reality was communicating with him. Once he'd figured that out, though, each new bit of information changed his understanding of our plight. Most of the awares looked at him as a kind of guru, a figure that commanded an almost religious awe, for he was a conduit to the world that had created us. He mostly resented this status, and I think he liked to talk to me because I didn't warp his theories into some kind of spiritual belief system. He saw me as someone who was just trying to figure things out.

"She finally told me what an applet is," he said. The voice in his head was female. "It's a small program used by websites."

"By what?"

"I don't know, it's some kind of antiquated computer terminology in their time, just like most of our names."

"Mine too?"

"I asked her that," he said, smiling. "But yours isn't antiquated. She laughed and said there've always been glitches and there always would be."

I wasn't quite sure what to make of that, but it was hardly the first thing on my mind. "I'm glad you're here. Something weird happened to me today."

"Oh yeah?"

"You know about Private Brown?"

"I got the upload. What about him?"

"He's in my squad," I said. "But the upload didn't tell me about that at first. I had to hear it from Lieutenant Upgrade."

Applet wrinkled his brow in thought. "Really? Odd. Did it fall into place afterwards? Maybe it's a glitch."

"Ha ha," I said. "The memories came with the upload, just like usual. But they were incomplete. Why?"

Applet shrugged. "Probably a last minute reprogram." He thought about it for a second, staring into space. "Unless . . ."

"What?"

"Maybe they're experimenting."

"You said this whole *thing* is an experiment," I said. This was the central premise of Applet's theory, particularly as it pertained to his personal situation. We were complex, semi-autonomous entities in an artificial universe, and according to Applet, extremely difficult to design. Now that they'd accomplished our creation – an experiment in itself – they were testing us, pushing us, seeing how we would react and change and evolve over the course of multiple sequences. Applet thought that the woman who spoke into his mind was studying him, trying to see how



he would react to each new piece of information.

"Well, yeah," Applet said. "In general. But this one is specific."

"You think they're working on me," I said, putting it together. "The way they've been working on you."

"Not exactly."

"What do you mean?"

"Maybe a *different* way," Applet said, shrugging. "Different than me. It may take a few sequences to figure it out."

"Shit." I ate some more, then tossed my can aside. "So, did you just show up to define the word 'applet', or you got a heads-up for me?"

Applet smiled. "What do *you* think?"

"When do we move out?" I said with resignation.

"Thirteen-hundred," Applet said, unwrapping a chocolate bar. He bit into it, and it sounded like one of his teeth cracked clean in half. He snapped off a chunk and offered it to me. I took it. "Combat patrol. They're assigning it to Lieutenant Interface, and your squad's targeted. I think they want to get Private Brown some action."

When he said 'they', I assumed he was talking about the programmers, not HQ. We didn't know for sure, of course, but however random the events of X Company's experience, we figured the virch overlords exerted a certain amount of influence.

"Just one squad?" I said.

"Yep."

"Merry Christmas."

Sure enough, Interface tracked me down fifteen minutes later. Second squad was pretty beat up this sequence, just seven guys left, even with Brown 'back' to reinforce us. My assistant squad leader was Corporal Punishment, a real hulk of a guy who usually lived up to his name. The rest of them were the usual assortment of interchangeable non-awares. Sergeant Burn had come over from first squad when his mortar team was taken out by artillery. Private First Class Ticket was one of the best shots in the platoon. Private School and Private Property were regular joes, good men, who'd become something of a two-man entity. I rounded them all up and Interface laid it out

for us. We were to comb the woods east of our position to relocate the enemy line. That was it. It was the kind of nebulous assignment that made most of us roll our eyes, but Brown took it very seriously, nervously flexing his fingers on the stock of his M-1, teeth chattering in the cold. We moved out.

"Why they always give us the shit jobs?" Property asked ten minutes later, as we trudged through the dead silence of the snowy woods, eyes squinting into the foggy distance for signs of the enemy. Property was the squad gripe.

"Whole regiment's on a shit job," Ticket said.

"Oh, hadn't noticed," Property muttered.

"How was the hospital, Brown?" Burn asked. "Any hot nurses?"

"Not really," Brown said.

"That why you came back?"

"I heard you were short-handed."

Burn smiled. "You're an idiot."

A couple minutes later, there was a muffled thump nearby. Brown whirled in reaction, pointing his M-1 at nothing in particular. "Relax, probably just snow falling off a tree," School said.

Up ahead, PFC Ticket held up a hand and fell to one knee. Everyone stopped in their tracks. For a few tense moments we all crouched motionless, straining to see something other than trees and fog. Finally Punishment asked, "What is it?"

A bullet punctured his helmet, and he collapsed.

More shots rang out. "Take cover!" I shouted. There was a decent-sized tree trunk a few yards off to my right that looked as though it had been sheared off by an artillery burst. I made for it, feeling a bullet whip past my ear as I hit the deck behind it. A body slammed down next to me – it was Brown.

I glanced off to my left to see what had happened to the rest of the squad. It looked as though they'd scattered, and I could only see two of the guys: School, lying behind a tree stump, his M-1 barking repeatedly, and Punishment, who was obviously dead. Only his eleventh, I think.

Extending my Thompson over the tree trunk, I fired blindly in the same direction I'd seen School aiming, then pulled the gun down and scooted several feet to my right in case they'd spotted my position. Bullets were throwing up chips of bark and wood just a few inches over our heads; when I glanced over at Brown, he was flattening himself into the snow, using one hand to hold his helmet down, so tightly it looked as though he were afraid his head might float away if he let go.

"Shoot at 'em!" I yelled, sending another unaimed burst toward the enemy position.

Brown heard me, picked up his rifle, and crawled to the end of the trunk to peek around the side. He went to aim his rifle, but a shot struck the ground nearby and he quickly rolled back to cover. "We're pinned!" he said.

"Can you see anybody else?" I asked.

"School!" he said. "I think he's hit!"

I crawled down to him and peered off toward School's position. He was hunkered behind the stump, trying to make himself small and clutching at his ear as the bullets zinged around him. There was blood all over the side of his face. He was in a bad position, no cover except for the shattered stump. If he tried to get away, he'd be hit for sure. "School!" I yelled.

He was able to glance my way, so at least he'd heard me.

"We'll cover you!" I shouted. "Make a run for it!"

"You nuts?" he retorted. He knew how vulnerable he was.

Another gun was firing somewhere nearby, so at least one of the other guys was still alive. "Brown, you got a smoke grenade?" Brown was glassy-eyed, petrified with fear. It took him a second

to register what I'd asked before he nodded. "Give it to me," I said.

He tried to unclip it from his belt, but his fingers were shaking uncontrollably. Impatiently I grabbed it off him, then tried to get a sense of which way the wind was blowing. I could feel machine-gun bullets pummeling the tree trunk just inches away. Sooner or later they'd chew right through the damn thing.

"Suppressing fire!" I shouted, hoping that Ticket or Property or Burn would follow the order. Brown was useless.

I jumped up quickly and hurled the grenade about fifteen feet in front of us, upwind of School's position. A couple seconds later I glanced up long enough to see that it had gone off and was throwing a curtain of orange smoke between us and the enemy.

"Now!" I said, grabbing Brown and dragging him to his feet. "Get out of here!"

I shoved him back the way we'd come, and the momentum carried him a few yards before he stumbled to the snow. I left him to fend for himself and raced over to School, who'd figured out what was going on and was struggling to his feet. "My ear . . .!"

"Come on!" I said, and we started running.

A minute or so later, the sounds of gunfire diminishing with distance, School said, "I never even saw 'em!"

"Me neither," I said, instantly wondering whether the program had even bothered to create the images of German soldiers that it had known we would never see.

My report to Lieutenant Interface didn't take long. Punishment was dead and Property was missing. School's wound wasn't bad, although the bullet had taken a bite out of his ear; he was on his way to the aid station in town, where they'd probably stitch him up and send him back to the line. We hadn't even accomplished the mission, really. There was no way to know if we'd hit the German line or just a patrol. I wasn't confident the information would have done us any good, anyway.

Interface took it all in grimly and clapped me on the shoulder before making off for Battalion. I decided to find my foxhole and smoke a cigarette.

When I got near it, I saw Brown, chipping away at the ground with his spade, trying to dig a foxhole. Nearby Burn and Ticket were sitting side by side in their own hole, speechless and blank-faced. I borrowed a spade from one of them and joined Brown, leaning my Thompson against a tree to help him dig. It would be something to keep my mind off what had happened to Punishment, and might even warm me up for a while.

"Thanks," Brown said, when I joined in.

I nodded. "You all right?"

"Guess I'm out of practice," he said. He had no way of knowing whether I was aware or not, how many 'memories' I had of his simulated combat experiences in Normandy or Holland.

"What are you gonna do," I said. "All that fog. Couldn't even see the bastards."

"I choked," he said.

"You gave me your grenade," I said. "Without that, we never would've gotten School out of there."

This didn't seem to mollify him. We kept digging.

I watched him out of the corner of my eye as we worked, thinking for the millionth time about the mindset that led these tourists from the future back to our perpetual hell. Why did they do it? One of Applet's theories was that this simulation was the product of a future so far removed from 1944 it would be completely incomprehensible to us. Humankind, he thought, had changed so dramatically that if we were to meet our designers, we might



not even recognize them as human. Perhaps, he argued, they had lost something along the way, had forgotten what it was like to be like us. When he'd first mentioned this idea to me, I'd asked him what the hell it was they thought they'd lost, and why would they come back for it? Applet had shaken his head. It was part of his curse that the voice in his mind rarely gave him a straight answer.

We finished digging the hole, and slumped down in it next to each other, exhausted. I lit one of the Lucky Strikes, offering one to Brown. He refused. I sat there smoking, feeling the sweat freeze on my body. "Where you from, sarge?" he asked.

"Toledo," I said automatically. Then it registered how odd the question was – not *what* he'd asked, but *that* he'd asked. I'd dealt with countless virchers on eighty tours, and not one of them had ever asked me a personal question. The non-awares did, of course, to pass the time. They didn't know any better, and it was just to add realism to the scenario. But the tourists knew that we were constructs, that our histories and personalities were fabricated for the benefit of the simulation. They didn't ask about our lives, because they knew we didn't have any.

"Toledo," Brown said, as if trying to picture it. I wondered if Toledo still existed in his world. "What'd you do there?"

Still a bit baffled, I didn't say anything right away. I sensed Brown looking at me and made to answer, but then First Sergeant Workaround called out from some distance away. "Glitch, look who's back!"

I whirled to see. Workaround was standing next to Private Property, who was cradling a bleeding arm, but looked okay.

"I'll tell you later," I said, and scrambled up out of the hole. It took a few seconds before a startling thought occurred to me: maybe Brown had virched in as a non-aware.

Maybe he thought this was all real.

At twenty-hundred hours that night Sergeant Workaround asked me to round up Private Dancer and PFC Firewall for OP duty. Workaround, constantly busy as platoon sergeant, always looked exhausted, and this sequence was worse than usual because he was struggling with dysentery again. By comparison I was in good shape, so I agreed to help him out.

I grabbed the guys and we started for the OP. The darkness and utter silence made our trip out a tense one, but we made it safely. Private Brown was on duty, along with Corporal Glyph. Glyph was more than happy to get off duty, and made for his foxhole to get some sleep, hardly acknowledging us. Brown was a little slower to get going, and we walked together back toward the main line of resistance. "How you holding up?" I asked him.

It took a moment for him to reply. "Tired."

I decided to test him. "Better get used to it," I said. "No telling how long we'll be here."

He didn't say anything, and I couldn't see well enough to gauge his reaction. Patton would break through tomorrow, right on schedule, ending the siege and alleviating the supply problems

considerably. If Brown was virching as an aware, he would know that. He might even take some comfort in the knowledge. But if that were the case, he didn't give himself away. I still wasn't sure.

Before we got back to the MLR the shelling started. I heard it coming and shouted at Brown to find cover. We raced blindly through the trees, looking for a foxhole to pile into, as the eighty-eight and mortar rounds landed all around us. A treeburst overhead threw shrapnel and splintered wood at me, and as I hit the deck I felt the debris raining down on my back. When I scrambled back to my feet, miraculously unhurt, Brown was gone.

I made record time to the nearest foxhole and dove in, landing on top of two other guys I couldn't identify in the dark. The three of us hugged the bottom of the hole for what felt like forever. The noise was deafening: explosions and crashes, orders being shouted, trees crashing to the ground, cries of "Medic!" Through it all we buried our faces in the frozen mud helplessly, waiting for the interminable barrage to stop. It lasted maybe ten minutes, but it felt like an hour.

I poked my head up and looked around, but couldn't make anything out in the smoke and gloom. I could hear someone moaning in pain, the sounds of medics scrambling around, NCOs shouting for everyone to stay down. Then I spotted someone about fifteen yards away, his helmet just visible above the level of the ground. His head was jerking around, and I wondered if it was the man I'd heard moaning.

"Stay here," I said and climbed out of the hole, scrambling through the snow toward the prone man.

When I got there, I realized it wasn't a foxhole. It was a shell-hole, and the man sitting in it was Private Brown. He'd jumped into it looking for cover only to find himself in a puddle of human remains, and was now sitting there, stunned and shaking, staring at his blood-covered hands.

We found out later it had been Glyph.

The breakthrough by Patton's Third Army cheered many, but did nothing for Brown's spirits. The shellings on Christmas had transformed him in some deep, irrevocable way. After just three days of combat, during which he had yet to fire a round, Brown already had the tragic, distant expression of a severe battle fatigue case.

It was at this point that I decided Brown must have been a non-aware vircher. I'd never seen a tourist react this way to so little combat before. Soldiers cracked all the time in X Company, or lost their edge, or became less effective in battle. But it was always a simulated soldier, a non-aware. The tourists were voyeurs, gamers, history buffs – or, if Applet was right, they were some kind of desperately curious posthumans investigating their past. They may not have been able to control the events of X Company, and hadn't allowed the programmers to steer them safely through the conflict, as might have been possible in one of the more historically accurate units. But even in X Company, their awareness of their situation – that none of it was real – was usually enough to prevent them from losing it, even if it didn't save them from being hit.

I was convinced, however, that Brown hadn't even permitted himself the luxury of understanding. He had opted for total immersion, complete verisimilitude. And he was paying for it. He actually thought this was all happening.

Over the next few days we fended off scattered German advances, sitting tight in the MLR, and while Brown did eventually fire his rifle a few times, most of the guys I asked said he

wasn't worth a damn in combat. I wanted to get him out of my hair before the offensive started, so I sent him back to the aid station on New Year's Day as a battle fatigue case. But the randomness of life in X Company defied me, again; our attack was delayed. The program threw Brown back up to the line just in time for our advance.

This was when the programmers got really devious. Fourth Battalion never knew what was fifty yards beyond their OPs, which pointed across a clearing toward another line of the Ardennes' ubiquitous, tall pine trees. Depending on the sequence, with frustrating randomness, what lay beyond them could be just about anything. The woods could be fifty yards deep or two thousand. On the other side, there might be some fictional Belgian town, a slope, a river, or hilly terrain. The German opposition could be fierce or nonexistent. Not even the awares knew what to expect when we went on the offensive. Even when there was a briefing, it couldn't be trusted. The information was frequently wrong, and if you lived through it, there would be talk of an intelligence failure.

Word of the offensive came on the night of the 3rd, shortly after Brown rejoined us. The next morning we would set off for the trees we had been memorizing for the past two weeks, part of the costly counterattack that would, historically anyway, seal Hitler's fate on the western front. They sent us some replacements, this time, and while there was never any point in knowing their names, the upload gave them to me anyway: Beta, Cipher, Eye, Floppy, ForNext, Loopback, Parts. I recognized some of them from previous tours. Others were brand new sims . . . new experiments.

After the briefing, as the non-awares groused in disbelief that after all they'd been through they were still being pressed into an offensive, I tuned out the chatter and kept an eye on Brown. But he was blank-faced, impossible to read.

We geared up the next morning, and I went over to Brown, who was ready before everyone else. He looked a little better. The time off had helped, maybe. It seemed as if he might be able to function. "Hey Brown," I said.

"Sarge."

"Stay close. I'm going to get you through this."

His eyes focused on me. "I'll be fine," he said, seeming slightly reassured.

We moved out. It wasn't snowing, but the sky was gray and the wind gusts cut right through us. Moving across open terrain in this climate was a nightmare, arduous and slow. We were easy targets; you didn't need to be an aware to know that.

I'd told the men before we left to keep some distance between them, and they did so as we made it across the first clearing. The Germans had pulled out of this section of the woods, apparently, but there was no telling how far back they'd fallen or whether they'd zeroed their artillery on this position. As we pressed on through the trees, we saw evidence of their MLR: foxholes, slit trenches, shell casings, abandoned equipment. We marched for ten minutes without seeing any action, but the sounds of distant gunfire and explosions warned us that it was a fighting retreat.

Twenty minutes after we started out, we reached the end of the woods and found ourselves staring at a terrifying sight: a wide open field, barren and windswept, no cover whatsoever. Another stretch of forest a few hundred yards away offered plenty of concealment for enemy snipers, forward observers and mortar crews. It was a death trap.

The entire company balked at the edge of the woods, crouching to rest in the relative cover of the trees, but Lieutenant Interface ordered them forward. We could see other units push-

ing out into the field on our flanks, and we had no choice but to follow them.

I led the way for my squad, glancing back once to see that they were following. Brown was directly behind me, and he was more or less expressionless, squinting into the wind. I nodded to him, but if he noticed, he didn't acknowledge it.

Then the shelling started. The Germans opened up with their eighty-eights when we were about halfway across the field. Brown and I were at the front of the advance, and the first shell exploded far behind us. "Spread out!" I said, hitting the deck. The treeline was too far away to see clearly. We were hopelessly exposed. Some of the men started firing, but it was a reflex, not really of much use. We were well out of range, and couldn't even see the enemy.

"Keep moving!" Interface shouted, like he always did when he made it this far. I glanced over at him, twenty-odd yards down the line from us, just in time to see a shell hurl him straight into the air. He landed in a heap, and didn't get up.

Some of the veterans, a couple of them awares I recognized, took up the slack, waving their men forward and inching their way through the snow at a crouch. Scanning the terrain in front of me briefly, I joined them, aiming for a slight depression in the field that might offer some small degree of cover. With artillery raining down and explosions tearing men to pieces, some of them ignored orders, but others responded, relieved to have some sort of direction. I could hear people screaming, calling out, walling in pain, but I narrowed my focus, intent on reaching my arbitrary stretch of snow-covered ground. When I got there, I hit the deck again and looked back to see about the others.

The replacements were panicking, bunching up, making themselves targets. The more experienced men were staggering forward individually, knowing that only a steady advance of overwhelming numbers would force an enemy retreat. As I watched, some of each were taken out by the shelling.

Another shell hit, too close, and Brown slammed down to the ground nearby. I turned to look at him; he seemed okay. I nodded encouragement, sucking it up for the next stretch. Even while I was doing it I wondered why I was taking such an interest in this guy. Whatever had compelled him to come here wouldn't make a difference to my interminable existence, even if I could figure out what it was.

Brown was peering forward, studying the scene. He signaled me to follow him. He was getting his legs, figuring it out.

I nodded. There was no way I couldn't go with him, at this point. He was making strides, learning how to function in this madness, and maybe that was all he had come here to do.

He clambered to his feet and made his way out of the depression we'd been lying in, and I followed a moment later. We were well ahead of the column, now, getting closer to rifle range. Only a handful of men, spotted in my peripheral vision, had made it this far out.

I tripped in the snow just as three shells exploded in rapid succession, all very close. I felt clods of earth and ice pelting me as I landed face-first, dropping my Thompson. Despite the numbing cold, I could feel a sharp pain in my chest, and inspected it; a piece of shrapnel had lodged there, jutting out. I rolled on to my back to prevent it from pushing in further, and automatically shouted for a medic, even though it was unlikely anyone could hear me. Lying there, trying to make sense of things, I somehow sensed that the wound wasn't that bad, and when I yanked the shrapnel out with gloved fingers, there didn't seem to be much bleeding. It was a good wound, a clean one. It might even get me off the line for a while.

"Sarge?"

I barely heard it over the din. It was Brown, several feet away, facing away from me on his side. I recovered my Thompson and crawled toward him, noticing as I did so that more men were moving past. It was a relief to see them advancing beyond us, taking up where we'd left off.

When I got to Brown, I rolled him on to his back to see what was wrong. He'd been hit very badly. The left side of his face had been shredded and was bleeding heavily. There was also blood soaking through his jacket on his abdomen, and soaking into the snow underneath him. He was a mess.

"Okay, Brown," I said. "You've done your bit. It's over."

"Where the fuck am I?" he asked.

His eyes were wide open, staring skyward, and he was shivering helplessly. He was in shock. He wasn't going to make it.

"You're right here, Brown," I said. "Right here with me. We're going to get you out of here."

"What am I doing here?" he asked.

I had no answer for that. To keep busy, I dug out my aid kit and went through the motions of trying to help him. "Close your eyes," I said. He was able to comply, and I sprinkled sulfa powder on his cuts.

"My stomach," he said, then let loose an agonized groan.

I searched frantically for a morphine syrette. "Hang in there," I said, then shouted again for a medic.

"This is fucking crazy," Brown said.

"Easy, kid," I said. "You're getting out of here. You're going somewhere else, somewhere better." That was true enough, even if he didn't know it yet. I found the syrette, slammed it into his leg.

He stopped talking as the morphine went to work, but I could tell he was still thinking, still here, and studying the expression in his eyes I started to wonder if maybe the pain had triggered his awareness. Maybe now, on the verge of 'death', his knowledge of the situation was flooding back to him, his memories of his future self, and now he was questioning it all. It made a kind of sense. There was no point in virching as a non-aware unless the memories of the experience kicked in after it was all over. Maybe that was part of the exercise, part of what had made Brown do it. It hadn't been enough for him to know that his experiences were random and realistic. He had needed them to be pure, untainted by knowledge or perspective. He'd made it as close to the real thing as he could. And now, at the end of it all, he had realized the insanity of that decision, the sheer folly.

"What am I doing here?" he mumbled, barely comprehensible.

"Helping us win the fucking war," I said, and it felt good to say, because I knew it would be something he would remember. And really, when it came down to it, that was the only sense of purpose I could muster. We made people remember. We were just a simulation, and like every book or film or history or story of the war, we only provided a glimpse of what it was really like. We were by no means the real thing. But if the people who came through our ranks returned to their safe, comfortable realities with even just a little bit of understanding...

"Sarge," Brown uttered, and I realized he was clapping my hand with all his remaining strength. "Where am I...?"

"You're going to a better place," I said again. "Relax, let it happen."

And he returned home.

Over the past several years Chris' short stories have appeared in a number of genre publications. This is his second appearance in *Interzone*.



THE COURT OF THE BEAST-EMPEROR

WRITTEN BY JOHN AEGARD & ILLUSTRATED BY DOUGLAS SIROIS

The poets say all the agonies of the last great war are upon the Beast-Emperor. It was very much His personal war, launched without counsel from any of His senior advisors, so He bore all of its madness and pain alone.

Though I was raised to be partial to the poets, I never believed in the Beast-Emperor's legend – at least, not until I came to the Court and heard His roar. Equal parts keen and thunder, it boiled from His secret place deep below my feet. The citadel trembled around the Equiton and I. Dust exploded from every surface. Even after the Emperor quieted, the quaking remained in the walls for a perceptible moment, as if the stones themselves were frightened.

The Equiton was unperturbed by his master's agony. He shrugged his feathered robe into the arms of a servant and sat cross-legged on a cushion before me. Though he was younger than I – he was string-haired, jug-eared, and so skinny he might have rolled off a windlass – he had a mark of experience on him. His jaw had an unnatural twist and a bulge, giving him half of a monstrous underbite. This deformity exposed an oversized row of sharp teeth, which pressed against his upper lip like a sawblade.

As protocol demanded, I recited the petitioner's creed, giving honour to the curse and the lawkult. When the Equiton nodded his acknowledgement, I began my story.

"Benevolence," I said, "my name is Evan Spandos, and I am before you for the sake of love." I brandished my papers. "For testimony, I offer these. They are the finest things ever uttered by our poets, but they speak to barely the hundredth part of my heart. With your leave, I will read –"

"No. Continue with your petition." His voice was perfectly mild. I resolved to respond in kind.

"When my love's parents were young," I said, "they were so burdened with obligations that they had to promise five children to the troops. My love was born sixth, the younger of twins. But her twin was frail, and suited for only soft life. He died during the winter. He had been on the frontier just a month."

As I spoke, I saw the Equiton's tongue flick over and through his misshapen teeth, as if he were exploring them.

"The local columneer desired my love for a replacement," I continued, "and with good cause, because she is hearty and level-headed and an expert horsewoman. He claimed that since only four of her kin were in service, the contract was unfulfilled. Since he took her last spring, I have searched for a recourse, and now I come to you."

The Equiton studied me like I was a gamepiece. "And you wish to have her restored to you."

"I do."

"And what are Lord Spandos's thoughts about this?"

"My father will not interfere. He loves the troops."

"I see." He shook his head. "You must know that I cannot reverse a frontier commander."

"What is the risk if you do?"

"What if the border is pierced for the want of a rider? What will happen to me then, Master Spandos?"

"She is but a single rider," I said.

"But, as you say, a very capable one."

"Can I not appeal to love?" I asked. "It is said that love rules this Court. The Emperor Himself has a poet's soul."

"He did, yes, but –"

"The columneer cannot ignore you," I interrupted, damning protocol. "One word from the Court . . ."

"I cannot give that word." He forestalled my next outburst with a raised palm. "But neither can I deny it."

My heart vaulted into my throat.

"Matters of the outlands must be judged by my seniors," he said. "Go below and serve our Court. You will be heard within the year. That is your privilege as a petitioner."

I bowed my head. "I abide –"

"There is nothing to abide yet." He stood. His servant replaced his robe on his shoulders and then he left without another word, his feet silent on the thick carpet of the room's privileged paths.

A lady servant led me below, to a windowless warehouse where a gang of chattering thralls exchanged my fine clothes – my fur-lined half-cape, my plunder-pants, my jewelled hat – for rougher things: stiff pants, a rough brown tunic, and wooden sandals. I donned this new finery, thinking about fleas, and then our descent resumed. The servant led me down many stairs and through a maze of bricked corridors. I cannot say exactly how far we descended, and my guide would answer none of my questions. At least I walked some softness into the pants.

At last, we came to rest in a dining hall, where a great stifling mass of men sat bent over plates of bread and parsnips. There, I was given into the custody of an older fellow, a little man who wore his black cap pulled down over his ears.

"You're the new man on the soup?" he asked.

"I think so," I said. "I'll have some of that bread, if you please."

"Oh, it's best you don't eat. First time, at least."

"But I'm hungry," I said.

"You won't be after you've stirred the soup for a minute. Come on, let's get to it." He pushed his plate away, took me by the arm, and pulled me from the dining hall. We went still deeper into the cellars. The corridor walls became rough-hewn and the floors turned to thin mud, but what alarmed me most was the air, which grew warm and damp and carried the promise of a monstrous smell.

My new friend was a chatterer too. "Ours isn't a bad job, really. Better than water-bearing. I'd rather see it going out than going up, that's what I say. We just got to help it along a little, that's all."

We came to a rack of poles, each twice as tall as I. My friend took two and gave me one. Our destination lay just beyond the rack. It was a great squat chamber, a little taller than me, and as long and wide as my father's trophy hall. In its floor was set the biggest pool of shit I'd ever seen. My friend stepped to the edge and began piling the muck. "Come on, get to it," he said.

"This is the soup?" I asked. I thought he was joking. I knew that petitioners did the worst work in the citadel, but I'd never expected this.

"That's what we call it," he said. "If the pipes clog, it'll overflow. Float everyone right out of the citadel, hah! Name's Getter, by the way."

"Evan Spandos," I said, forming the words with as little air as possible.

He froze, staring at me. "A Spandos lordling, down here?" he said. "Who'd believe that? Not that I hold it against you – a man's a man, I say –"

"My father was here during the war," I rasped. My eyes burned and my tongue tasted as though it had been painted with the stuff.

"You don't say! Did he stir the soup?"

"I don't know," I said, circling my pole's tip in the muck.

"No, no," Getter said. "You're too – go good and deep!" He leaned out over his pole, jauntily holding himself over the pool. "You'll be here forever if you just splash around like that. Not that you should listen to me – I've been down here a good long time. Months, I think. They want me to think that they've forgotten me, so I'll give up and go home. That's how the tarkers run you off. You going to make it, chum?"

I nodded and put my pole all the way into the soup.

"That's the way. You'll be upstairs in no time. What is it you're here for?"

"Love," I said.

"That'd do it."

From pipes in the ceiling, a renewing flow poured, splattering in the pool.

"Suppertime up there!" Getter said. "Better get to it!" Then he began to sing:

*Oh, down here it's steaming!
so pour some more cream in!
we'll make dumplings for demons!
and then we'll be free men!*

Later, when my lungs had adjusted, I sang him a verse of my own:

*When I see you, I know how sad
is the bee who cannot speak of his nectar.
all my words, an impotent heap
for someone above whom clouds will not gather.*

"Very pretty," my new friend said, his face thoughtful. "But you can't stir shit to it."

We man-petitioners were quartered in a vast room adjacent to the dining hall. There were no games or songs among us. We worked too hard to think of anything other than our labours, especially the water-bearers. When the overservants tolled our rest, we ate our hard bread and our bitter turnips and then we slept huddled against each other on our ramshackle pallets. The cellars were always frigid. The air-fonts produced only chill winds.

As autumn gave way to winter, I found myself adjusting to this dismal way of life, to the fleas, to the rotten food, to my terrible work, and even to the Beast-Emperor's roars, which shook the cellars a few times each day. Getter was a valiant friend. He rallied me when my mood was foul and when my blisters cracked and left me unable to work, he stirred harder to make up for my absence. He talked endlessly, though never of his own petition. It seemed embarrassing to him. I did not pry.

My thoughts were with my love always. The notion of her suffused my weary body like sunlight, and when I dreamed, I saw her posed in my father's gardens, her ear bent to my whispers. When I woke it was always a hopeful waking, for that day might be the day she was restored to me.

It was early in winter when I first was summoned above.

A trim, white-robed woman shook me awake and ushered me silently up into the citadel. Oh, the air, the fire-warmed, fragrant air! I nearly wept as I drew it in. She brought me to a small, stone-floored room, then silently indicated that I should strip naked. She dusted me with fragrant powder, then a water-bearer rinsed me. My real clothes had been left in the room. My finery had become voluminous; it hung on me like sails. I wondered how long it would take for my comfortable girth to reappear.

When I was dressed, the woman led me to the offices of an Equitark. Hope surged within me. In such a place, anything could be accomplished. In this place, the heart could rule.

The offices were not a match for their occupant's position. They were of a modest size, panelled in plain wood, and darkened by curtains heavy enough to shut out any daylight. When my eyes adjusted to the dim, I saw the Equitark sitting on a low chair in a corner opposite me, his face shrouded by a veil. I saw no obvious curse-marks on him.

"You have tended the cesspool with alacrity, Master Spandos," he said before I could recite the petitioner's creed. "My compliments to you for that." His voice was rich and rolling and humourous.

"I had brought some poems, munificence –"

"Effit," he hissed. "I have read your pages. I hear useless words every day of my life, and I am tired to the bones of them. Here, we let deeds dictate our proceedings." He took a golden token from his pocket and tossed it into the fireplace beside him. "Build a fire there," he said. "Stack it full of wood and dungbricks. I want a conflagration, an inferno, and you can kindle it with these ridiculous verses." He tossed my poems into the pit.

He turned his back on me as I followed his instructions. It pained me to see those beautiful pages curl and flake in the fire, but I did not hesitate. The wood was dry and caught easily.

"Let it burn for awhile," he said. "Our game will need a good bed of coals."

"What's the game?" I asked.

"You'll see," he said. "Now, be quiet – I want to listen to it burn."

I sat silently, daring to hope, letting the fire's welcome heat sear the cellar's chill out of me.

"Pass me the tongs and the poker," the Equitark announced suddenly, perhaps twenty minutes later. I jumped up, retrieved the tools, and put them in his outstretched hand. He cast them aside with a clatter.

"Now, to our game," he said. "I hold your columneer's contract in my hand. If you retrieve my token for me before I grow too impatient, I will cast it into the fire."

I glanced back at him. The contract's red seal glistened wetly in the firelight. Instantly, I was on my hands and knees, peering into the fire, but I could see nothing of the token – it was buried deep within the blaze.

"Now we will answer the question of the hour," the Equitark trilled. "I must admit, I am curious – I have heard that even the poets can't know feelings of your depth, so we must resort to other means to discover the truth, hmm?"

I leaned as close to the fire as I dared. My eyes watered, my every breath burned, my eyebrows felt like burning lines, and I still could not see the token.

"Why so slow?" he said. "Place that coin in my hand and I will draw a certificate that confirms the Emperor's blessing on you and your love. I will seal your vows myself, pay for your banquet from my accounts, and order the Emperor's dragons to cool your guests with the beat of their wings."

I thought I saw a corner of the token, in the fire's seething heart.

"I'm not sure what you fear from the fire," the Equitark said evenly. "You're so spoiled on the milk of the poets – you're probably too rotted inside to burn very well."

Infuriated, I gritted my teeth and thrust my left hand within the coals. For an instant, they were as cool as ivory gambling tiles. I rummaged through them, sifting for the hard, hot token – and then I was not my own man. My hand was gone, replaced by a demon of pain. I cried out and closed my eyes and rolled onto my back.

The Equitark knelt beside me. His hand, large and cool, touched my face. "Do you have it?" he whispered. "Ah, I didn't think so."

I rolled away from him, weeping from the pain.

"You know, Spandos, there must be ten thousand things in this Court that are more important than the puppy-love intrigues of a shiftless highborn. Perhaps now I can attend to some of them."

I sobbed as I beheld my charred hand. The veins pulsed weakly within. My fingernails were blood red. As I watched, my fingers tightened into a claw. I could not control this motion.

"There are now two choices before you, the Equitark said, his tone perfunctory and well-rehearsed. "You may ask for my decision now and then leave the citadel immediately after I render it. Or you may return to the cellars, continue to serve us, and postpone your judgement."

I gaped at him.

"So you will remain, then?" He chuckled. "Very well. Who knows – perhaps your circumstances will change." He rang a bell, summoning servants to lead me away. "I will see you another day, Master Spandos."

Our dining hall had a vat of greasy unguent used for the treatment of wounds. When I returned to the cellars, I thrust

my injured hand fully into it – and then I howled, because it stung like vinegar.

I slept only a few moments that night. In my dreams, I knelt before a chopping block with a stone in my good hand. I used it to made pudding of my burned one, then I nailed the stringy remnants to the block and dragged them off my wrist. I felt no pain in my hand's absence, only satisfaction. I suppose I made some noise during this dream – perhaps I cried out – because my neighbour kicked me awake. I slept no more that night.

I rose with the bell and staggered to the cesspool. I found I could stir the soup by clenching the butt of the pole between my arm and my breast and sweeping it around with my good hand.

Getter did not appear that morning, and no one came to take his place. Perhaps his petition had been heard? I didn't know, but I welcomed the opportunity to perform the work of two men. My stirring-pole was my only weapon, and on that first day after my meeting with the Equitark, I wielded it in a rage, singing Getter's song aloud, imagining each stroke adding some small measure of sincerity to my petition. But when the final bell sounded and I shuffled away from my job, my only reward was a new row of blisters in my armpit.

As I lay alone on the pallets that night with my hand held up in the cool blast of the air-fonts, I realised that I might go mad. I thought of the men who worked my father's lands, of the hollow eyes that armoured them against lunacy, and I resolved that for as long as I was in the cellars, I would think no further than the next stroke of the pole.



I sobbed as I beheld my charred hand...

On a few occasions, I nearly fell asleep at the pole and tumbled into the pool. It seemed to me like the allowed sleeping periods were becoming briefer. To compensate, I began to allow myself catnaps during work periods. No one scolded me for this. I seemed to be doing a good job. The level of the pool never rose, not even when I was sure that I had overslept.

Sometimes food was brought directly to me. I didn't object to this. Very few people in the dining hall spoke my language, and even those who did shunned me, probably because of my smell.

The pain in my hand eventually faded, although the wounds showed no signs of healing. Numbness and paralysis replaced the pain. I thought with some terror about blood poisoning.

The overservants began serving wine to me, rough and strong and heavy with tar. At first, I feared it, because it sharpened the agony of my love's separation and dredged up painful remembrances of the Equitark's fire. Soon, though, I learned that I could drink myself beyond the point of hurt. Following this discovery, I never failed to empty my picher.

My next upstairs encounter came with no warning. Men dragged me from the cesspool floor, put a sack over my head, and walked me the great long way upwards. When they removed the sack, I was in the Equitark's office again, facing his shrouded face.

"Douse the lanterns," he said. Gas whispered, then we were in blackness. I heard the rustle of cloth.

"How are you faring in the cellars?" he asked. "You don't look

bad, considering . . . Yes, I can see you perfectly. I am not blind."

"The cellar hasn't flooded yet," I said.

"I'll come to the point, then, so you can get back to your work. Tell me, were you born in time for the war?"

"My father –"

"I know about your father. I asked about you."

"No, munificence. I was born after the war."

"Oh, then you don't know about how clever the greenies were. They knew the magics of swamp and sea, and they used them to flood every one of our mines, and they starved us for iron."

I stood, numbly waiting for him to return to the present. He was not being pleasant, but he wasn't being disagreeable. Did this mean that he might have opened to my petition?

"There was only one mine left to us, a place the greenies had not destroyed. There was no need for them to do so, for the earth in that region was tainted with its own poison. The mine had been prospected, dug, and abandoned, and nearly forgotten.

Our warleaders were desperate for iron – our levies were fighting with sticks – so they sent men down into it. When they began to fall sick, they refused to work. Our soldiers drove them back into the mine. One man escaped and came here. We had to hear his petition, just as we had to hear yours. Do you know the lawkult's credo, Spandos? Have your poets taught you that?"

"The pain of the judged shall be on the judges, and thus will all pain be diminished," I recited.

"Correct. The war put the Court in chaos. Our curse was killing us as quickly as the greenies were killing our soldiers. No one knew how long the Emperor would survive. But I knew my duty and was determined to serve it. It fell to me – a mere Equitark – to hear this miner speak. He told me that his fellows would die before they'd dig a spoonful of ore from the place. I served him wine, listened to him, and then judged that he and his comrades should return to their jobs, and that anyone that resisted should be killed.

"More soldiers and men were taken there. Iron flowed out. Blessedly for me, the mine's taint was not a fatal one. But everyone who served in that place more than a few days suffered a terrible sickness, one that hardened their eyes into useless stones."

Dimly, it came to me that I ought to be embarrassed to be standing in front of the Equitark with my once-fine clothes now covered in reeking filth.

"My eyes were touched too, although differently. I can see perfectly, but any light, even the glow at the tip of a dying candle, is brighter as the sun to me. The darkness of the mine, I suppose . . ."

Then he was silent for awhile.

"The petition, munificence?" I asked, finally.

"Nothing has changed, Spandos. Nothing at all."

"I have done all you asked."

"You have stirred shit."

"I have sacrificed –"

"You have sacrificed?" he said. "You have an odor and a sore hand, and I live in terror of a parted curtain."

"You won't get rid of me," I said, remembering what Getter said.

He sounded bored. "You've but to ask for my ruling, Spandos, and your business here will be over. By curse and cult, I'll be glad to be done with you –"

I could not see his face for the dark. I couldn't tell whether I ought to wager my hope on this moment or wait for a better one. But this man held me in such deep contempt, how could I dare gamble?

"Uh," I said.

"I thought so." The Equitark snapped his fingers. The lights hissed back on. His veil was back in place, and his servants back at his side, helping him to stand.

"Wait, please!" I cried after him. "Set me any task, let me prove –"

"I've already set you a task."

"I'll sign any contract," I pleaded. "I'll serve you for as long –"

"You think this is a market? You think you can barter with me, Master Spandos?" The door opened and closed behind him.

My food was served to me in the cesspool chamber every day after that. The food appeared while I slept. Later, as the distinction between sleep and wakefulness began to fade, it seemed as though I would close my eyes and food would appear, along with wine. Wine and wine and more wine, flowing from the jug as fast as I could drink it.

My burnt hand by now had hardened into a useless claw, though it ached, it always ached, and the wine did nothing for it. I walked circuits around the edge of the pool, pole held like a lazy lance. Some days I would try to count how many circuits I made around the pool but I never counted more than seven before I lost track.

My love, I saw only in my dreams. Her words were like taffy. She grew angry when I could not understand her. When I awoke after those dreams I would bound to my feet and race around the cesspool like a racing dog, singing about dumplings, until I was panting and needed wine.

The ceiling lowered. I scraped my head on it. It pushed down on me until I could only shuffle along on my knees and then so that I had to crawl like a worm and then I was pressed directly into the floor so that I barely could move.

I wriggled to the wine and waited for someone to come. And then the ceiling was back above me but the soup had risen, it was a finger deep on the chamber floor. I seized my pole and ran around the pool and stirred, but it would not cease its ascent. It was crawling up me fast as an ant now. At my knees it subsided and then fell off. I went to the highest point in the room, a piece of floor that sloped upwards to meet the wall, and I curled up there on the dry part and trembled. Soon after that the pool was back to normal and then it rose again. I think I slept but maybe not.

I heard the Emperor roar and shake the bricks. I shouted along with Him and tried to sing Getter's song but I couldn't remember it.

There was no more wine.

I stood before the veiled Equitark again, mute and shivering. The air in his office was terribly cold compared to the warmth of the cesspool chamber.

"Begin," he said. The air shimmered, and I saw an image of my love, her eyes wide open, her short hair rippling like wheat in the wind. "I thought we should look in on her," the Equitark said. The view fell backwards. She was on horseback, standing in her stirrups at a full gallop. Her bow was in her hands. Her fingers flew on the string. Three arrows fell in the breast of a distant scarecrow. Her mouth opened in silent, joyous triumph. Then I saw her with a dozen others like her, hardened, tanned men and women, lounging carelessly around a fire while the sun set behind them. From the looks of their soundless faces, I imagined gales of laughter arising above them. "My compliments, Master Spandos. She is remarkable –"

The nearest thing was a gilded vase. I grabbed it and dashed

it to pieces on the floor and then I stomped the pieces and the flowers into a paste –

Two of the Equitark's men dashed into the room and held me. "Let him alone," their master ordered. "He is exactly as I suspected."

I roared gibberish at him.

"Listen to me, Spandos." The Equitark stood in front of me. "This vision is not the truth of your lady's life. Rather, it is drawn from your own dreams – or, to be more exact, from your nightmares."

A trick! My mind seethed.

"This damns you, you know," he continued. "We have seen that her happiness is something that you fear."

"That's a lie –"

"What kind of venomous creature," my tormentor snarled, "fears the happiness of his love? And then you think you can deceive me about the truth of your feelings? They are so plain on your face that even I can see them."

"Please, stop –" I blurted.

"Oh, how you disappoint me, young Spandos. How can your shoulders even bear that noble name? Your father must loathe you! I met him when he brought his war petition, you know. He knew the terrible things he asked of us, and he respected us for hearing them." He sighed. "I would find you merely pitiful, except that you have wasted so much of my time that I must

loathe you."

I tried one final time. "I love her –"

"No," he snapped. "You do not. Your kind of love is a scoundrel's duty. You have somehow confused the yearning for the thing with the thing itself. Oh, you tell yourself you are on some grand enterprise, worthy of a great ballad, but the truth is, Spandos, you are empty. You are nothing."

I had no more words for him.

"Now begone," he said. "I cannot bear your stench any longer." I went.

I was not escorted away from the Equitark. I navigated my way through the endless hallways of the citadel and down to the cesspool by smell and by wits alone.

My footsteps were surprisingly light. The ballast had been knocked out of me, the weight that had kept me upright, and now what? The Equitark spoke truth, wretched, hurtful truth, truth that was worse than the vilest lie.

The cesspool was before me, liquid and peaceful and – welcome? My trembling stilled. This was the final brave thing I could do.

"I'm sorry," I said aloud. I was sorry to my love for hating her happiness; I was sorry for squandering the Equitark's time.

I crossed my arms on my chest and fell forward. The murk closed over my head.



I awoke between crisp sheets. Gentle light – the sun, filtered by the last snows of the springtime – filled the room. My skin, fresh and pink, held neither the stain nor the stink of the cesspool.

Though all my faculties were with me, I didn't feel quite awake. Unless I wished otherwise, my mind was quiet. The only discomfort I felt came from my burned claw-hand. A steel armature had been placed in my palm and then wound outwards, forcing the hand open. Such was the skill of my healers that this treatment was not painful. Even the Emperor's roars were faint in this peaceful place. They were more like pleasant, distant thunder than the raging death-screams I'd heard before.

Orange-draped servants attended me constantly, bringing me food the equal of that served by my father's kitchens. My girl returned in days. Fine-fingered women checked my hand every midday, painting it with a soothing pink sludge. Under their care, my hand returned to me, stiffly at first, and then perfectly, without even a scar.

The physicians asked me if I would like work. I told them yes, and they allowed me to stand watch over their apparatus, over the flasks and torches and glass cauldrons that they used to prepare their elixirs. This was an uncomplicated but precise duty. I completed every batch exactly as I was instructed. They were

pleased with me.

I stayed within their precincts, unwilling to risk my serenity anywhere else in the citadel, until one day when they instructed me to deliver a pastille of a medicine to an Equitark named sal-Jesic. The directions took me a league across the citadel and into a corridor whose windows were covered with heavy velvet, so I was not surprised to find that sal-Jesic was the veiled Equitark who had tormented me.

"Munificence?" I said into the darkness of his room.

"Spandos," he said, sounding unsurprised. "You have been told how to prepare the medicine?"

"I was told to burn it in a censer with three coals."

"Correct. When it is ablaze, bring it close to me."

I went out to the furnace and lit the censer and then, stepping carefully in the dark, returned it to him. "I am holding it at your breast now, munificence."

I heard the rustle of cloth as he bent over the censer and drew a deep breath. Suddenly he was quaking and coughing and spitting. Startled, I withdrew, but his hand was like iron on my arm. "No!" he rasped. "Bring it closer!"

He inhaled again and again, his tortures undiminished, and then, finally, he pushed me away. I put the censer aside and went back to him. In the dimness, I could see that he lay slumped in his chair, quaking and panting.

"Do you need water?" I asked.

His searching hand took mine. "No," he whispered, "but thank you."

"That must help your eyes – it will be worth it, someday," I said, remembering what my nurse had said about unpleasant medicine.

"My eyes will never heal," he said, his voice lifeless. "But my physicians fear their affliction may spread to my brain. The medicine arrests it, but only for a day. I shall need it again tomorrow. Go now, but return at the same time."

When I stepped into the light outside of his offices, I saw that my shirt was spattered with blood from his coughing. I stood in the hallway and stared down at my shirt for some time. I had always regarded the Equitark as a malevolent, vengeful monster, but now I knew that he was a mere man, a frail creature whose duties paid in blood and misery.

I was of two minds as I returned to my laboratory. I was sorry, of course, for sal-Jesic's torments, but to work in his presence, serving something good and important – that idea buoyed me.

A letter arrived from home. It had been sent at tremendous cost – up north, the passes were slow to clear in the springtime, and any rider who could navigate them could name her own price.

The letter bore my father's signature, but was composed in my nurse's hand. In the mildest words, they begged for news of me, and asked that I return home as soon as I could, because the house was diminished without me. I replied briefly, saying that I was well, although I did not know when I would return.

I fell into sal-Jesic's service that spring, bringing him his medicine, and then later his food and his clothes and then finally taking complete charge of him. We abided by an unspoken agreement not to discuss my embarrassing petition.

The Equitark treated me as agreeably as I have ever seen a man treat a servant, and in return I served him with all my diligence. One day I found an idiot petitioner pulling down the curtains in his offices. I put my boot to this clumsy man's ass, cursed him for an idiot, and watched with pleasure as he raced away.

My work pleased me. It kept my mind still.

With summer came the Court Festival. I helped with this when sal-Jesic could spare me. I went into the cellars and found every entertainer I could among the petitioners. There was a great surplus of them; I suppose that artists and jugglers and singers have more complaints than respectable men.

From the musicians among them, I fashioned a band. Horns and drums played a majestic march as the entire lawkult assembled in the citadel's greatest hall, which was decorated in a foreign style. Bolts of silk and lace hung in each of the room's thirteen corners. Cool-burning candles hung within them, lighting us with blue and green and pink.

The Equitarks seated themselves by the order of their pains. The Emperor did not attend, so the first and the saddest was sal-Hezas who, as a young Equiton, had refused to free an efficient woman from a slave contract signed by her great-grandfather. His pain calculations had failed to account for her children, and after returning to her master, she bore quintuplets, slaves also by the contract. As these children were put to work, the Equitark's back bent under their weight. Now he resembled a reddened fishing hook more than a man, and he needed two canes and two servants to aid him.

sal-Jesic was eighth to enter; his war wounds gave him some additional status. Last came wise old seni-Firkin, whose only

regretful decision had been her refusal to sanction a careless physician. She suffered small, never-healing boils on her forehead. The doctor was clumsy with his lancet, we had heard.

A parade of amusements – poets, acrobats, singers, fools and sensualists – awaited the lawkult. My old self would have sold ten years of his life to see some of them, but the lawkult beheld them in utter silence, never clapping or cheering. I saw exasperation among them as they struggled for a response, and I found it impossible to treat them kindly afterwards. They were like children. If they knew of the noble sufferings of the lawkult, they would not shame themselves so.

The entertainment ended. The sensualists circulated among the Equitarks, cooing over their wounds and occasionally spiriting one away to privacy. Food and drink appeared from the kitchens. I aided those who could not serve or feed themselves, and spent some time trying to please seni-Beyer. Two years before, she had removed a highborn man from his ancestral home and wealth and placed a more deserving cousin in his place, and since then the best food and drink had tasted like dust to her. I brought her rum-cakes and rose creams and even some peppered apple vinegar, but nothing would awaken her tongue.

"Quite a wretched night," I said to sal-Jesic at the end of the night, as I guided him home.

"Every Festival is wretched," he told me.

"Why subject yourselves to them?" I asked.

"In search of our missing hearts," he said. He would not elaborate.

The Equitark was in a more jovial mood when I met with him the next day. I stepped into his darkened chambers, after his summons, and he called out his greetings pleasantly. By then, he knew the tread of my foot and could always distinguish my comings and goings from those of other servants.

"I've a judgement that needs your wisdom, Spandos," he said.

I had become quite casual with the Equitark, but of course, I'd never helped him with a judgement before. I was about to ask why when someone else interrupted.

"Spandos?" the voice – familiar, but unrecognisable – said.

"Quiet," said the Equitark. "Raise the lights, Spandos."

"Your eyes, munificence?"

"I am veiled. Raise the lights."

I found my way to the valves and turned them a quarter. Gas hissed, and in the dim light I saw that it was Getter in the room with us. He stood before the Equitark, his face hopeful.

"This is your friend from the cellars?" asked sal-Jesic.

"Yes," I said. In the presence of the Equitark, Getter wore better clothes. His head was bare and bald, and I saw he had a mark on his forehead, one that had been concealed by his old woollen cap. Approaching, I recognised it. It was the mark of my father's justice. Getter was an exiled thief.

"We have a petition here that you must hear," said the Equitark. "It is a matter of your father's lands, and also of the heart."

"I am no expert of the heart, munificence," I said.

The Equitark ignored me. "This man was a fearsome thief in his day. Nothing could be kept safe from him – he once stole the golden teeth from a sleeping columneer's mouth."

Getter nodded silently.

"He was captured two years ago," continued the Equitark. "His money was seized and he was exiled from the Spandos holding. If he returns, he will be beheaded. He asks that we instruct your father to allow him to return so he can tend to his wife's grave." His voice turned conversational. "It is quite a

monument he raised to her, he says."

"I've heard of this monument," I said. "You called yourself Groder then –"

Getter nodded.

"Do the poets write about this monument?" asked sal-Jesic.

"Yes, I heard of it in a poem," I said sheepishly.

"Assume, for once, the poets speak truthfully. How does this petition move you?"

Getter was watching me intently. I looked away from him.

"My father will not abide thieves," I said.

"Yes, so much is apparent," said sal-Jesic. "But this man claims to love deeply."

I was silent.

"Mr Getter suffers while you stand here dumbly," said sal-Jesic, his voice low.

"Love is the scoundrel's duty," I said.

"Not true," said sal-Jesic. "But that is a matter for another time."

"The poem's coming back to me," I said. "They say there's a fortune in jewels hidden somewhere inside the monument, so cunningly concealed that only its builder can retrieve it. It has been smashed to pieces by treasure hunters."

"They wrecked it?" blurted Getter. "Whoresons and bastards –"

"Quiet," commanded the Equitark. "So you think that our Getter here wishes to return to claim his hidden trove?"

"Who can say if the legend is true or not?" I said.

"Then what do you say to this petition?"

"You cannot trust a thief,"

I said, finally.

"Not even one who loves?"

I shook my head.

"I see," said sal-Jesic.

Getter's breathing was heavy, as if he were fighting down rage.

"If you follow that advice, you will be right more often than wrong," I said. "And even if the poets lie and there is no treasure trove, he may simply be returning so he may steal some more from my father. I wouldn't stake my health on his truth."

"You poxed little cockroach –" Getter hissed.

"Thank you, Spandos," sal-Jesic said. "You may go now."

More letters arrived from home. They felt like intrusions, and I suspected that if I entertained their contents, I might be yanked from this good and noble world and back into the selfish one inhabited by my old self, so I burned them away unopened.

"Do you realise," said sal-Jesic one late summer dawn, "that it has been almost a year since you came here?"

We were standing on an eastwards balcony, awaiting the sunrise. The Equitark's veil would admit the sun's heat while rejecting its light.

"Your petition has not been decided," he said. "It must be so before the year is gone." I pleaded silently for him to forget it, but no such luck – he was back to his old capriciousness now.

"Since I am so fond of you now," he told me, "I am forbidden from deciding it. I have passed it upwards, to the Emperor." Ignoring my stunned look, he continued. "He wishes to see you, so he can judge it and end the matter."

"I can't see the Emperor –"

"He expects you today."

"This is ridiculous," I declared. "Why waste the Emperor's time? Find an Equiton –"

"This is not a command," sal-Jesic said. "You will not be dragged into His Majesty's presence." The sun licked the horizon, and sal-Jesic turned to face it. "You don't know the honour you're declining. His attention is a rare thing, especially these days. We don't know how many good days He may have left."

"If you think it necessary –"

"I think it wise."

"I will go then," I said, though I trembled inwardly at the thought of the great Emperor considering my ridiculous petition.

sal-Jesic called for the Emperor's special red-robed servants. They silently led me to the centre of the citadel, to a great smithy where burly steelmen, their fingers alit with cool welding magics, assembled a cage around me. They took their metal from the twisted, bent remnants of older cages, which were heaped in a corner of the workshop.

Once caged, I was cranked onto a wheeled hook that rolled on rails hung from the rafters. The steelmen kicked my cage and I slid outside, into sudden daylight. I was in an interior square of the citadel, a sandy-floored place surrounded by windowless walls. So this was the hiding place of the Beast-Emperor, I thought. He had withdrawn from the Court after the war, and no one, not even my father, knew the details of His internal exile. I would have to describe this place to my father when I saw him next.

That disfigured head rose to face me...

My father loved his Emperor dearly. Scarcely a month into His rule, he had come to the Court on behalf of all the frontier lords. After a time in the cellars – not even the highest-born could escape that duty – he petitioned the Emperor for an empire-wide mobilisation against the greenies, to finish them for all time. The Emperor had boldly granted their petition, igniting first a rebellion from the cowardly kings of the interior who were unsympathetic to the frontiersmen, and then the long, brutal war against the greenies.

My father had never forgotten the Emperor's boldness, and toasted Him at every opportunity. But he never understood the price the Emperor paid. I knew that when I spied His Majesty for the first time.

He lay like a cat in the shadow of the citadel's inner walls, His massive bony head resting atop a fallen stone. My cage stopped an easy bowshot away from Him, rocking underneath its creaking catwalk, and then, with a rattle, it began to descend on its chain.

"Majesty, I withdraw my petition," I called to Him.

That disfigured head rose to face me as the cage ended its descent. My feet now were perhaps a foot above the sand.

"There is no need for you –" I continued, but terror suddenly silenced me. The Emperor took to all fours and bounded towards the cage with His head lowered and His crown of bone aimed dead at my knees. Just before He struck the cage, I leapt upwards and wrapped my hands around its chain. The cage swung crazily around me. I braced my feet against its bars and swung along

with it. The Emperor dashed His head against it again and again with terrible force. One of His horns broke off inside the cage and rattled on its bowl-shaped floor.

"I withdraw!" I screamed at Him. "I withdraw! Please, Majesty –" Two bars had come from the cage's floor. A third snapped away when He struck me again. More of that and the floor would fall away altogether, and when I lost my grip on the chain, I would fall along with it.

The Emperor withdrew, shaking His head as if to clear it, and then He paced around me. The legacy of His war was plain upon Him. His flanks were covered with weeping wounds, punctures and slashes and yellow bruises. Battle madness had infected His mind and then crawled outward into His skull, flaring it into a petrified crown of spikes.

He finished studying me and rose on His hind feet. He pushed the cage like a child's swing until it was sideways above Him. I lost hold of the chain and fell on the cage's side, above Him. My face was before His. He rattled me gently.

"Majesty, I withdraw my petition!" I whispered.

He did not roar or gore. He simply looked at me, and I at Him.

The poets say that one can see into eyes just as well as one can see out of them, and as I beheld the Beast-Emperor's, I knew that the poets were, for once, correct. Despite the madness of their setting, his eyes were the sanest I had ever seen. They were ruled by love deep and abiding, love that rendered pain and injury and lunacy powerless, love that had prodded Him to launch a war that had saved His lands from the greenie scourge but had cost Him utterly.

And I had come to the Court to ask Him to meddle in my stupid, courtly intrigues.

I trembled in shame, but the Emperor's gentle voice stilled me. "Your petition is ended," He rumbled. Blood ran down His face, from His broken horn. "Go quickly. My madness will return soon."

"I'm sorry –" I began.

"We should never apologise for what moves us."

"You move me," I said. "Goodbye, Majesty, goodbye!" The Emperor turned away from me and paced back to His shade.

The cage was winding upwards again, but my heart was suddenly so light I thought it might bear me upwards by itself.

"I had anticipated this," said sal-Jesic when I told him of my decision. "In all my years I have never seen anyone who loves as deeply as you, not even the Emperor. You know," he said, his voice lowering, "had you forced me to rule on your petition, I would have decided in your favour. It would have injured me gravely to kill a heart as great as yours, do you know that?"

"None of that matters now," I said.

"You will be a fine EQUITARK –"

"I care nothing for the rank," I interrupted. "I wish only to serve."

"If you acquit your heart's burden, then the rank will attend to itself. If wisdom preserves you, you will be Emperor someday."

"You flatter me," I said.

"I do not," he said, and then we sat down to the first of endless lessons.

It was winter when my old love came to the Court of the Beast-Emperor. She had braved blizzards and sleet and snow to ground the dragons, and I nearly didn't recognise her when she limped before me. Her hair had lightened from gold to straw and now fell uncut to her damp shoulders.

I waved away my servants and sat in front of her, keeping

my hood drawn and my face hidden. She observed protocol expertly, speaking the petitioner's creed and waited for my signal to proceed.

"Benevolence," she said, "I am in search of my love, Evan Spandos. He journeyed here on my behalf last year. Since I have read nothing from him since, I surmise he had been held past the customary time."

"Continue," I whispered, for I suddenly remembered how I had loved to hear her voice.

"I am a frontier rider," she said, boldly. "I have killed twenty greenies with my own hands. And now I ask, in return for my service to the Emperor, that my Evan be released to me. Without him in my heart, I should not be nearly so zealous. So it is for the benefit of the Emperor's armies that he be restored to my side."

"It cannot be done," I said, struggling to disguise my voice.

Her eyes narrowed, but her voice remained even. "Damn the curse and the lawkult, then. I will tear this citadel down until I find him –"

"It is useless," I said. Something in my tone betrayed my true identity. She crouched beside me, stepping without care on the privileged carpets, and reached out to push my hood aside.

"Evan!" she said, her eyes widening. "What have they done to you?"

"They have done nothing," I blinked aside a tear. "I have chosen this."

"You can't be –"

"My love for you was childish," I said. "I used you to complete myself. This duty is – purer. It suits me."

She reached into my robes and found my hands. "I know the stories," she said. "It will kill you."

"Someday," I said.

"You would ask me to stand aside while you destroy yourself."

"I would ask you to do nothing."

She took me by my shoulders and pulled me to my feet. She was stronger than I remembered. "For the last year and a half, Evan, I have awoken with your name on my lips. Everything I did, I blessed with your name. I even slept alone in the winter – do you know what that means, to sleep alone in the outlands on a winter night?" She knelt before me and began taking off her boots. "It cost me two toes, because I thought you would prefer that I sleep alone. Shall I show you?"

"There were never vows between us," I said.

Her face hardened and she stopped struggling with her boot. In that instant, she became a stranger to me.

"No. I suppose there weren't."

She stood and turned away from me and limped from my offices with her shoulders high. My servants say she did not break her stride until she was atop her horse.

I never saw her again.

My sleep was as dreamless as death that night, and has been ever since. Laughter now passes through my heart like wind through lace. Smiles, I mimic from memory. It is the Equiton's heart, sal-Jesic told me. It is how our kind are blooded.

Every morning I say the lawkult's credo: the pain of the judged shall be on the judges, and thus shall pain be diminished. The pride in these words is the last thing in my heart. I know that even when all the other pieces of me are rent by the curse, it shall remain.

John Aegard lives in Seattle with his wife, author Victoria García, and a porky cattle dog named Midge. Visit him online at www.johnzo.com.

the arthur c. clarke award

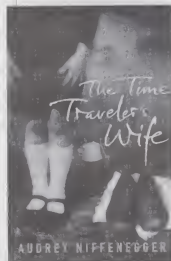


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THE CLOCKWORK ATOM

Over here, mister. This is the place."

The girl tugged Mativi's sleeve and led him down a street that was mostly poorly-patched shell holes. Delayed Action Munitions – the size of thumbnails and able to turn a man into fragments of the same dimensions – littered the ground hereabouts, designed to lie dormant for generations. Construction companies used robot tractors to fill in bomb damage, and the robots did a poor job. Granted, they were getting better – Robocongo was one of equatorial Africa's biggest exporters. But usually the whites and the blacks-with-cash sat in control rooms a kilometre away directing robots to build the houses of the poor, and the poor then had to live in those houses not knowing whether, if they put their foot down hard on a tough domestic issue, they might also be putting it down on a DAM bomblet a metre beneath their foundations.

This street, though, hadn't even been repaired. It was all sloped concrete, blast rubble and wrecked signs telling outsiders to KEEP OUT THIS GOVERNMENT BUILDING! FIELD CLERICAL STORES! IMPORTANT GOVERNMENT WORK HERE YOU GO BACK!

"Come on, mister", said the *phaseuse*. "You will see, and then you will have no problem paying."

"You stand still," commanded Mativi suddenly. "Stand right there."

Nervously, he reached into a pocket and brought out the *Noli Timere*. It only worked fifty per cent of the time, based on information gathered from scientist-collaborators from all factions in the war, but fifty per cent was better than zip.

He turned the device on, on low power in case any of the more recent devices that smelled mine detector power-up were present, and swept it left and right. Nothing. He flicked it up to full power and swept again. A small stray air-dropped anti-personnel device at the north-west end of the street, but otherwise nothing.

"You see that house over there, Emily?" he said, pointing across the road. The girl nodded. "Well, you're not to go in there. There is an explosive device in there. A big one. It'll kill you."

Emily shook her head firmly. "It isn't *nearly* as big as the one that took Claude."

Mativi nodded. "But you say the device is *still there*."

"Has been since I was very little. Everyone knows it's there. The grown-ups know it's there. They used it when the *slim* hit, to get rid of the bodies that we wouldn't get sick. Sometimes," she said, "before the bodies were entirely dead."

"You can't get *slim* from a dead body," said Mativi.

"That's what you say," said Emily. And he knew she was right. So many generously altered genomes had been flying around Africa in warheads fifteen years ago that someone *could* have altered HIV and turned it into an airborne, rather than blood-borne, virus – like the rickettsial haemorrhagic fever that had wiped out all of Johannesburg's blood banks in a single day and made social pariahs of blacks all over Europe and America overnight.

The sun dropped below the horizon like a guillotine blade, and it was suddenly night, as if someone had flicked a switch in Heaven. Mativi had gotten too used to life off the equator, had been working on the basis that night would steal up slowly as it had in Quebec and Patagonia. But the busy equatorial night had no time for twilight. He hadn't brought night vision goggles. Had he brought a torch?

As they walked up the street, a wind gathered, as if the landscape sensed his unease.

"You have to be careful," said the girl, "tread only where I tread. And you have to bend down." She nodded at Mativi's Kinshasa Rolex. "You have to leave your watch outside."

Why? So one of your backache boyfriends can steal it while I'm in there? To satisfy the girl's insistence, he slid the watch off his wrist and set it on a brick, but picked it up again when she wasn't looking and dropped it into his pocket.

"Where are we going?" he said.

"In there." She pointed. Half-buried in the rubble was a concrete lintel, one end of a substantial buried structure, through which the wind was whistling.

No. Correction. *Out of which* the wind was whistling.

She slipped under the lintel, on which was fixed a sign saying WARNING! EXTREME PERSONAL DANGER! The room beyond had once had skylights. Now, it had ruined holes in the roof, into which the geostationary UNPEFORCONG security moon poured prisms of reflected sunlight. 35,900 kilometres above Mativi's head, he and five million other Kinshasans were being watched with five thousand cameras. This had at first seemed an outrageous intrusion on his privacy, until he'd realized that he'd have to commit a thousand murders before any of the cameras was likely to catch him in the act.

"Don't step any closer," said the girl. "It will take you."

The entrance had promised an interior like any other minor military strongpoint – only just large enough to contain a couple of hammocks and a machine gun, maybe. But inside, after only a few steps down, the room was huge, the size of a factory floor. They had entered via an engineer's inspection catwalk close to the roof. He was not sure how far down the floor was.

The wind in here was deafening. The girl had to shout. "THERE IS MORE THAN ONE IN HERE. THEY LIVE IN THE MACHINES. THE GOVERNMENT MADE THE MACHINES, BUT NOT WITH TECHNICIANS AND ELECTRICIANS. WITH *SORCERY*."

The machines did not look made by sorcery. They were entirely silent, looking like rows of gigantic, rusted steel chess pawns twice the height of a man, with no pipes or wires entering or leaving them, apparently sitting here unused for any purpose. Mativi felt an urgent, entirely rational need to be in another line of employment.

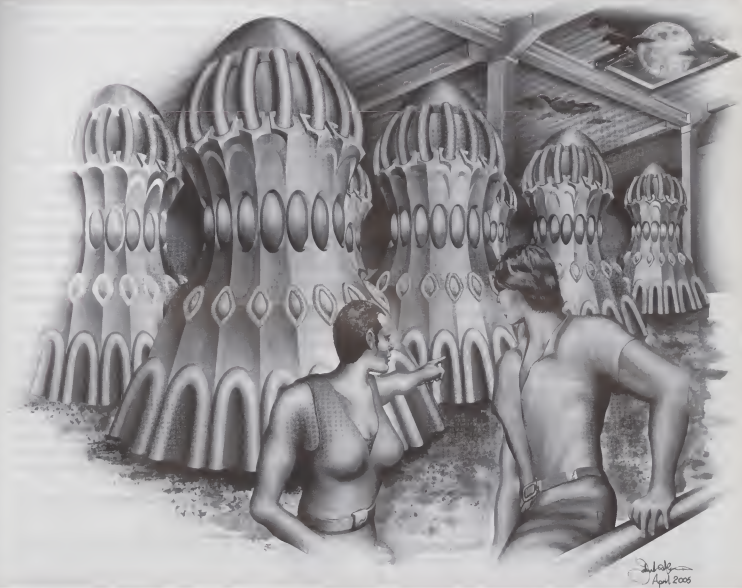
"HAVE YOU ANY IDEA WHAT THE MACHINES WERE BUILT FOR?" said Mativi, who had.

The girl nodded. "THE DEMONS ARE IN THE MACHINES," she said. "THE MACHINES WERE BUILT AS CAGES. THE MILITARY MEN WHO MADE THIS PLACE WARNED ALL THE MOST IMPORTANT MEN IN OUR DISTRICT OF THIS. THEY WARNED MY FATHER. THEY TOLD HIM NEVER TO BREAK ANY OF THE MACHINES OPEN. BUT OVER TIME, THEY LEAK, AND THE DEMONS CAN GET OUT. THE FIRST TWO MACHINES ARE SAFE, FOR NOW. BUT YOU MUST BE CAREFUL, BECAUSE WE THOUGHT THE THIRD ONE WAS SAFE TOO, AND IT TOOK CLAUDE."

"WHAT DID IT DO TO CLAUDE, WHEN IT TOOK HIM?" said Mativi. He could not see any damage to the walls around the third machine beyond, perhaps, a certain swept-clean quality of the dust on the floor around it.

"IT TOOK HIM," said the girl. "IT MADE HIM SMALL. IT SUCKED HIM UP."

BOMB :: DOMINIC GREEN



ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOHN G. WILLIAMS

"THE MACHINES," said Mativi in broken Lingala. "THEY ARE COVERED WITH . . . WITH THINGS."

The heads of the chess-pawns, under the light of Mativi's torch, were surrealistically colffeured with assorted objects—spanners, wire, door furniture, and, worryingly, a single fragmentation grenade. Many, perhaps more than half of the things were ferrous metal. But some looked like aluminium. Some were even bits of wood or plaster.

Not just magnetism, then.

He fished the fake Rolex out of his pocket, waved it in the direction of the machines, and felt a strong tug on it as he held it in his hand. But he also felt a strong tug on the sleeve of his shirt, and on his arm itself.

He realized with growing unease that the wind was not blowing out of the chamber, but *into* it, pushing him from behind. It also appeared to be blowing in through the skylights in the roof above. It did not seem to be blowing out anywhere.

The girl gasped. "YOU SHOULD NOT HAVE DONE THAT! NOW YOUR WATCH WILL NOT KEEP GOOD TIME."

"IS THAT HOW THE MACHINE SUCKED CLAUDE UP?"

"NO. ALL THE MACHINES DRAW THINGS IN, BUT YOU CAN PULL YOURSELF LOOSE FROM MOST OF THEM. BUT THE ONES THE DEMONS LIVE IN WILL SUCK YOU RIGHT INSIDE WHERE THE DEMON LIVES, AND NOT LEAVE A HAIR BEHIND."

"WHOLE PEOPLE?"

"PEOPLE, METAL, ANYTHING."

"STONES?" Mativi picked up a fragment of loose plaster from the floor.

"YES. BUT YOU SHOULD NOT THROW THINGS."

He threw it. The girl winced. He saw the plaster travel halfway across the floor until it passed the second machine. Then it jerked sideways in mid-air, as if attached to invisible strings, puffed into a long cone of powder, and vanished.

The girl was angry. "YOU MUST DO WHAT I SAY! THE MILITARY MEN SAID WE SHOULD NOT THROW THINGS INTO THE BAD MACHINES. THEY SAID IT MADE THE DEMONS STRONGER."

"YES," said Mativi. "AND THEY WERE ABSOLUTELY RIGHT. NOT *MUCH* STRONGER, BUT IF ENOUGH PEOPLE THREW IN ENOUGH UNCHARGED MATERIAL OVER ENOUGH TIME . . ."

"I DON'T UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU MEAN BY UNCHARGED MATERIAL."

"DO YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT I MEAN BY 'EVERYONE WOULD DIE'?"

The girl nodded. "WE SHOULD NOT STAY TOO LONG IN HERE. PEOPLE WHO STAY TOO LONG IN HERE GET SICK. THE DEMONS MAKE THEM SICK."

Mativi nodded. "AND I SUPPOSE THIS SICKNESS TAKES THE FORM OF HAIR LOSS, SHORTNESS OF BREATH, EXTREME PALENESS OF THE SKIN?"

"YES," said the girl. "THE VICTIMS DISPLAY THE CLASSIC SYMPTOMS OF RADIATION ALOPECIA AND STEM CELL DEATH."

Well, I'll be damned. But after all, she has lived through a nuclear war. She's been living among radiation victims her entire life. Probably taught herself to read using Red Cross posters.

"WELL, THE SAME DEMONS THAT WERE USED IN THE RADIATION BOMBS ARE IN HERE. SLIGHTLY DIFFERENT, BECAUSE THESE ARE A SLIGHTLY DIFFERENT WEAPON. BUT THE SAME DEMONS."

The girl nodded. "BUT THESE ARE NOT RADIATION BOMBS," she said. "THIS MEANS YOU HAVE TO PAY ME DOUBLE." She held out her hand.

Mativi nodded. "THIS MEANS I HAVE TO PAY YOU DOUBLE." He fished in his wallet for a fistful of United Nations scrip.

After all, why shouldn't I pay you? None of this money is going to be worth anything if these things destroy the world tomorrow.

"I'm telling you, there are at least forty of them. I counted them. Five rows by eight . . . I didn't go to the hotel because I didn't want to call you in the clear. We have to be the only people who know about this . . . Because if anyone wanders into that site, *anyone at all*, and does anything they shouldn't, we will all die. I'm not saying *they*, I'm saying *we*, and I'm not saying *might die*, I'm saying *will die* . . . Yes, this is a Heavy Weapons alert . . . No, I can't tell you what that means . . . All I can tell you is that you must comply with the alert to the letter if you're interested in handing on the planet to your children . . . Your children will grow out of that, that hating their father thing. All teenagers go through that phase. And credit where credit's due, you really shouldn't have slept with their mother's sister in the first place . . . No, I do not want 'an inspection team'. I want troops. *Armed* troops with a mandate to shoot to kill, not a detachment of graduates in Peace Studies from Liechtenstein in a white APC. And when I put the phone down on you, I want to know that you're going to be picking up your phone again and dialling the IAEA. I am serious about this, Louis . . . All right. All right. I'll see you at the site tomorrow."

When he laid the handset down, he was trembling. In a day when there were over a hundred permanent websites on the Antarctic ice shelf, it had taken him five hours to find a digital phone line in a city of five million people. Which, to be fair, fifteen years ago, had been a city of ten million people.

Of course, his search for a phone line compatible with his encryption software would probably be for nothing. If there was this few digital lines in the city, there was probably a retro-tech transistor microphone planted somewhere in the booth he was sitting in, feeding data back to a mainframe at police headquarters. But at least that meant the police would be the *only* ones who knew. If he'd gone through the baroque network of emergency analogue lines, every housewife in the *cit  * would have known by morning.

He got up from the booth, walked to the desk, and paid the geek – the geek with a *submachinegun* – who was manning it. There was no secret police car waiting outside – the car would have been unmarked, but extremely obvious due to the fact that no one but the government could afford to travel around in cars. The Congolese sun came up like a jack in a box and it was a short walk through the zero tolerance district back to his hotel, which had once been a Hilton. He fell into the mattress, which bludgeoned him compliantly unconscious.

When he opened his hotel room door in the morning to go to the one functioning bathroom, a man was standing outside with a gun.

Neither the man nor the gun were particularly impressive – the gun because it appeared to be a pre-War cached ammunition model that hadn't been cleaned since the Armistice, and the man because his hand was shaking like a masturbator's just before orgasm, and because Mativi knew him to be a *paterfamilias* with three kids in kindergarten and a passion for N gauge model railways.

However, the gun still fired big, horrid bullets that made holes in stuff, and it was pointing at Mativi.

"I'm sorry, Chet, I can't let you do it." The safety catch, Mativi noted, was off.

"Do what?" said Mativi.

"You're taking away my livelihood. You know you are."

"I'm sorry, Jean, I don't understand any of this. Maybe you should explain a little more?" Jean-Baptiste Ngoyi, an unremarkable functionary in the United Nations Temporary Administration Service (Former People's Democratic Republic of Congo), appeared to have put on his very best work clothes to murder Mativi. The blue UNTASFORDEMRECONG logo was embroidered smartly (and widely) on his chest pocket.

"I can't let you take them away." There were actually tears in the little man's eyes.

"Take what away?"

"You know what. *Everybody* knows. They heard you talking to Grosjean."

Mativi's eyes popped. "No. Ohhh *shit*. No." He leaned back against crumbling postmodernist plasterwork. "Jean, don't take this personally, but if someone as far down the food chain as you knows, everyone in the city with an email address and a heartbeat knows." He looked up at Ngoyi. "There was a microphone in the comms booth, right?"

"No, the geek who mans the desk is President Lissouba's police chief's half brother. The police are full of Lissouba men who were exonerated by the General Amnesty after the Armistice."

"Shit. Shit. What are they doing, now they know?"

"Emergency measures are being put in place to contain the problem'. That's all they'd say. Oh, and there are already orders out for your arrest For Your Own Safety. But they didn't know which hotel you were staying in. One of them was trying to find out when he rang me."

Mativi walked in aimless circles, holding his head to stop his thoughts from wandering. "I'll bet he was. God, god. And you didn't tell them where I was. Does that mean you're, um, not particularly serious about killing me?" He stared at Ngoyi ingratiatingly. But the gun didn't waver – at least, not any more than it had been wavering already. Never mind. It had been worth a try.

"It means I couldn't take the chance that they really did want you arrested for your own safety," said Ngoyi. "If a UN Weapons

Inspector died in Kinshasa, that would throw the hand grenade well and truly in the muck spreader for the police chiefs, after all."

"I take it some of them are the men who originally installed the containers. If so, they know very well full amnesties are available for war crimes –"

Ngoyi shook his head. "Not for crimes committed *after* the war."

Mativi was alarmed. "After?"

"They've been using the machines as execution devices," said Ngoyi. "No mess, no body, no incriminating evidence. And they work, too. The *bachèques* are terrified of them, will do anything to avoid being killed that way. They think they're the homes of demons –"

"They're not far wrong," muttered Mativi.

"– and then there are the undertakers," continued Ngoyi. "They've been using the machines for mass burials. Otherwise the bodies would just have piled up in the streets in the epidemics. And the domestic waste trucks, about five of them stop there several times a week and dump stuff in through the skylights. And my own trucks –"

"Your own trucks?"

"Yes. Three times a week, sometimes four or five." Ngoyi returned Mativi's accusing stare. "Oh, *sure*, the UN gives us geiger counters and that bacterial foam that fixes fallout, and the special vehicles for sucking up the fixed material and casting it into lead glass bricks –"

"Which you're supposed to then arrange for disposal by the IAEA by burial underground in the Devil's Brickyard in the Dry Valleys of Antarctica," finished Mativi. "Only you haven't been doing that, have you? You thought you'd cut a few corners."

"The UN gives us a budget of only five million a year!" complained Ngoyi. "And by the time that reaches us, it has, by the magic of African mathematics, become half a million. Have you any idea what it costs to ship a single kilo of hazardous waste to Antarctica?"

"That's what you're supposed to do," repeated Mativi, staring up the barrel of the gun, which somehow did not matter quite so much now.

"We were talking astrophysics in the Bar B Doll only the other night. You told me then that once something crosses the Event Horizon, it never comes out!" said the civil servant, mortified. "You *promised*!"

"That's absolutely correct," said Mativi. "Absolutely, totally and utterly correct."

"Then," said Ngoyi, his face brightening insanely, "then there is no problem. We can throw as much stuff in as we want to."

"Each one of those containers," said Mativi, "is designed to hold a magnetically charged object that weighs more than ten battleships. Hence the reinforced concrete floor, hence the magnetized metal casing that attracts every bit of ferrous metal in the room. Now, what do you think is going to happen if you keep piling in extra uncharged mass? *Nothing* that crosses the Event Horizon comes out, Jean. *Nothing*. Ever. Including you, including me, including Makemba and Kimbareta and little Laurent."

Ngoyi's face fell. Then, momentarily, it rose again. "But our stuff is only a few hundred kilos a week," he began. "Much less than what the domestic waste people put in."

"I feel better already. You're not going to be personally responsible for getting the whole planet sucked into oblivion, it's going to be some other guy."

"The sewage outlet, mind you," continued Ngoyi. "That must be pumping in a good thousand litres a day –"

Mativi's jaw dropped. "*Sewage outlet?*"

"Sure. The sanitation guys rerouted the main waste pipe for the city as a temporary measure. They have to keep replacing the last few metres – the machine keeps eating the pipe." Ngoyi shrugged. "How else do you think they keep five million people's shit out of the drinking water?"

"Jean-Baptiste, you people have to stop this. You have to stop it now. You have absolutely no idea what you're doing."

The gun was still pointing at the centre of Mativi's chest; now, just for a moment, it stopped wavering and hit dead centre.

"I know *exactly* what I'm doing. I am making sure I can feed my wife and children."

The finger coiled round the trigger, slowed down as if falling down gravity slopes. Mativi winced.

The gun clunked and did nothing.

Ngoyi stared at his uncooperative weapon tearfully.

"I must warn you," lied Mativi, "that I led my university karate team."

"You should leave," said Ngoyi. "I think I recognized the municipal sanitation inspector's car following the bus I took down here. He had a rocket propelled grenade launcher on his parcel shelf."

The road surface rose and fell under the Hyundai like a brown ocean swell, testing its suspension to the limit. Mativi heard things grounding that probably ought not to.

"Can I drop you off anywhere?" He braked gently as the traffic hit the blast craters around the freeway/railway junction, which had been a prime military target. Robot repair units were still working on it, and their operators did not pay much attention to cars that weighed one tenth what a mine clearance tractor did. The streetlights seemed to be out on this stretch of road, and the only illumination came from car headlights bouncing up and down like disco strobes. The robot tractors did not need visible light to see.

"The stadium will do fine. I can catch a bus out to Ndjili from there."

"You live that far out of town?"

"We don't all live on Geneva salaries, you know." Ngoyi's face blanched suddenly as he stared into the evening traffic. "Stop the car! Handbrake turn! Handbrake turn!"

Mativi stared into the traffic. "Why?"

"Four secret police cars, dead ahead!"

It was true, and Mativi cursed himself for not having seen it. The SUV's stood out like aluminium islands in the sea of polycarbonate AfriCars. Each one of them would have cost ten times an ordinary Kinshasan's annual salary.

"It's not a roadblock," said Mativi.

"So I should care? They're out looking for you!"

"Looks like an escort. They're not even coming down this road. They're turning onto the freeway to Djelo-Binza. They're escorting that big, heavy launch tractor... one of the ones designed to carry clutches of heavy ballistic missiles out to the pads at Malebo." He peered out of the driver-side window. "The one whose suspension is scraping the ground –"

He did a handbrake turn and left the road in the direction of Djelo-Binza. The suspension hardly noticed the difference. The only reason people drove on roads any more in Kinshasa was because the road was slightly more likely to have been checked for explosives.

There was only desultory hooting when he rejoined the road. Leaving the road and rejoining it after a four-wheel-drive short-cut was common. The four-by-fours were clearly visible now, crammed with whatever men the police chiefs had been able to get their hands on at short notice – some in military uniform, some in T-shirts, some with government-issue sidearms, some with war-era AKM's, yawning, pulled out of bed in the early hours.

The crawler was taking up three lanes of traffic, drawing a horde of honking AfriCars behind it like a bridal train. Despite the horns, the crawler was probably not moving much slower than the cars would have done – the expressway was still a mass of blast craters.

"I can't believe this," said Mativi, hugely affronted. "How can they think they can haul a million-tonne object across town without me noticing?"

Ngoyi stared. "You think that thing's got – things on it?"

Mativi nodded. "One of the things is on board – one of the containers. They're taking it across town because they can't bear to lose it . . . I wonder why." He winked at Ngoyi. "Maybe they're in the pay of the office of sanitation?" The car plunged into yet another black void unilluminated by its headlights. "Jesus, I wish those streetlights were working." He blinked as the car bonnet surged up again into the light.

Then he realized. Not only were there no streetlights, there were also no lights in the city around the road.

"That's it, isn't it."

"What?"

"They're going to the power company. You dumb fucks have been plugging power into it as well. *Haven't you?*"

Ngoyi hesitated, then gave up the game and nodded. "It started out as a theoretical weapons project in the last days of the war. But," he insisted defiantly, "it was a *peaceful* use we put it to! One of our office juniors, a very clever young man, a PhD from CalTech, suggested that if we aimed an infra-red laser beam at the event horizon at a certain angle, it would come out as a gamma-ray beam, which we used to heat a tank of mercury . . . we tried water first, but it flash evaporated and fused the rock around the tank to glass." He licked his lips nervously. "The hardest part was designing a turbine system that would work with evaporating mercury. We lost a lot of men to heavy metal poisoning . . ."

Realisation dawned on Mativi. "You were one of the researchers in Lissouba's government."

"You think I could have got away with living in the old People's Democratic Republic with a physics degree *without* being a weapons researcher?" Ngoyi laughed hollowly. "Dream on, brother. But this is *peacetime* now. The technology is being used to power the houses of five million people –"

"Uh-uh. There's no sidestepping the Laws of Thermodynamics. You only get out less than what you put in. You're only getting power out because you're sapping the angular momentum of what's inside the container. I'll lay a bet that what's inside the container was created illegally using the Lubumba Collider that President Lissouba convinced the UN to build to 'rejuvenate the Congolese economy'."

Ngoyi squirmed. "He also said *scientifically* the Congolese economy. He actually used the word 'scientificy'."

Mativi nodded. "In any case, that angular momentum was put *into* the container by gigawatts of energy pumped into the Collider from the city power grid. Effectively all you're doing is using up energy someone stole and stored fifteen years ago. It's no more a power source than a clockwork doll is, Jean-

Baptiste. You have to wind it up to watch it go. And all you'll be left with, in the end, is a nonrotating very heavy lump of extremely bad shit."

"Well, I must admit," admitted Ngoyi ruefully, "the amount of juice we can squeeze out of it is getting smaller every year."

The tractor in front suddenly rumbled to a halt in a cloud of dust big enough to conceal a herd of rhinos. A wall of immobile metal barred the cartilageway, and three lanes of drivers performed the peculiarly Congolese manoeuvre of stepping on their brakes and leaning on their horns simultaneously. One of them shrieked suddenly in dismay when a length of caterpillar track resembling a chain of house façades clipped together with traffic bollards slammed down onto his bonnet and crushed it flat, before slapping his saloon into a cabriolet. Paint flakes flew everywhere. The car was a steel one, too – an old Proton model produced under licence in Afghanistan. Mativi hoped the driver had survived.

Troops poured out of the four-by-fours, ignoring the barrage of horns. They were staring at the side of the tractor. Some good Catholics were even crossing themselves.

Mativi put the handbrake on and left his car. Someone hooted at him. He ignored them.

One whole side of the tractor had collapsed into the asphalt. The torsion bars of the vehicle's suspension, each one a man's waist thick and made of substances far, far stronger than steel, had snapped like seaside rock. The load on top of the tractor had slumped sideways underneath its canvas blanket.

Now that he was outside the car, he was aware of a hissing sound. The sound was coming from a hole punched in the canvas cover.

Some of the troopers were walking up towards the load. Mativi danced out onto the grass verge, waving his arms like an *isangoma*. "No! Non! Get away! *Très dangereux!*"

One of the men looked at Mativi as if he were an idiot and took another step forward. His sleeve began to rustle and flap in the direction of the hole in the canvas. Then his hand slapped down onto the canvas cover, and he began to scream, beating on his hand, trying to free it. His comrades began to laugh, looking back towards Mativi, enjoying the joke their friend was having at the crazy man's expense.

Then he vanished.

Not quite vanished – Mativi and the troops both heard the bones in his hand snap, saw the hand crumple into the canvas like a handkerchief into a magician's glove, followed by his arm, followed by his shoulder, followed by his head. They saw the flare of crimson his body turned into as skin, bone, blood vessels, all the frail materials meant to hold a body together, degenerated into carmine mulch and were sucked up by the structure. A crimson blot of blood a man wide sprayed onto the canvas – out of which, weirdly, runnels of blood began trailing *inward* toward the hole, against and at angles to gravity.

The police troops turned and looked at Mativi, then looked back at the tractor.

"Alors, chef," one of them said to him, "*qu'est-ce qu'on fait maintenant?*"

"It's loose," said Ngoyi, his eyes glazed, seeing the ends of worlds. "It's loose, and I am responsible."

Mativi shook his head. "It's not loose. Not yet. We can still tell *exactly* where it is, just by feeding it more policemen. But its casing's corroded. It's sucking in stuff from outside."

"Not corroded." Ngoyi shook his head. "It won't corrode."

It's made of nickel alloy, very strong, very heavy. It's one of the cases we bored a hole in deliberately, in order to shine in the infrared beam. There'll be another hole in the casing on the far side. Where the gamma comes out."

Mativi nodded. *One of the machines the demons live in.*

Ngoyi still seemed to be wary of even looking at the container. "Could it topple over?"

"No. If it begins to topple, it'll right itself immediately. It's probably scrunched itself down into the top of the tractor doing that already. Remember, it's a small thing rotating, rotating *fast*, and it weighs over a thousand tonnes. The gyroscopic stability of an object like that doesn't bear thinking about –"

"CETAWAYO BRIAN MATIVI! I AM HEREBY BY THE ORDER OF THE UNITED NATIONS PEACEKEEPING FORCES OF THE CONGO PLACING YOU UNDER ARREST."

Mativi turned. The voice had come from a senior police officer. The amount of shiny regalla on the uniform confused matters, but he was almost certain the man was a Lieutenant.

Mativi sighed. "Lieutenant –" he began.

"Major," corrected the Major.

"– Major, I am engaged in preventing a public disaster of

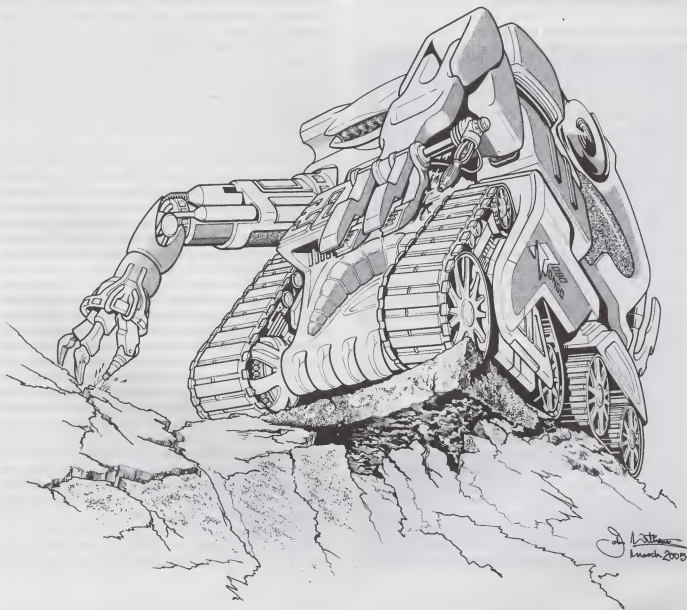
proportions bigger than anything that might possibly be prevented by arresting me. Do you know what will happen if that load falls off that wagon?"

The Major shrugged. "Do you know what will happen if I see you and don't drag you down to the cells? I will lose my job, and my wife and children will go hungry."

Mativi began to back away.

"Hey!" The Major began to pointedly unbutton his revolver.

"I know what will happen to you if you don't bring me in. And you forgot to mention that there'll be no power in the city either, and that as a consequence a *great number* of wives and children will go hungry," said Mativi, circling around the danger area of bowed, permanently windblown grass near the tractor's payload. He waved his arms in the direction of the dark horizon. "You can see the evidence of this already. The device on this tractor has been uncoupled from the grid, and immediately there is no power for refrigeration, no power for cooking, or for emergency machinery in hospitals. I know all that." Slowly, he put his hands up to indicate he was no threat. Then, with one hand, he swung himself up onto the side of the tractor, with the payload between himself and the Major.



"But you truly cannot begin to comprehend what will happen to those wives and children if I allow this load to continue on to Djelo-Binza, sir. You see, I understand at a very deep level what is in this container. You do not."

"I must warn you not to attempt to escape custody," said the Major, raising his pistol. "I am empowered to shoot."

"How can I be trying to escape custody?" said Mativi, looking down the barrel of the pistol as if his life depended on it, and sinking in his stance, causing the Major to lower the pistol by a couple of centimetres, still training it on his heart. "I'm climbing on board a police vehicle."

"Get down off that police vehicle, now," said the Major. "Or I will shoot."

Mativi licked his lips, looking up a pistol barrel for the second time that day, but this time attempting to perform complex orbital calculations in his head as he did so. *Have I factored in relativity properly? It needs to travel dead over the hole – "Shan't."*

The gun fired. It made quite a satisfactory *boom*. There was a red flash in mid-air, and Mativi was still there.

The Major stared at Mativi.

"As I said," said Mativi, "I understand what is in this cargo. You do not. Do I have your full cooperation?"

The Major's eyes went even wider than his perceived Remit To Use Deadly Force. He lowered the gun, visibly shaken.

"You do," he said. "Sir," he added.

The Hyundai became bogged down by bodies – fortunately living ones – in the immediate vicinity of the Heavy Weapons Alert site. A crowd of perhaps a thousand goggling locals, all dressed in complementary rayon T-shirts handed out by various multinationals to get free airtime on Third World famine reports, were making road and roadside indistinguishable. But the big blue bull bars parted the crowd discreetly, and Mativi dawdled forward to a hastily-erected barrier of velcrowire into which several incautious onlookers had already been pushed by their neighbours. Velcrowire bars would sink a centimetre deep into flesh, then open up into barbs that could only be removed by surgeons, providing the owner of the flesh desired to keep it. Barbed wire was not truly barbed. Velcrowire was.

The troops at the only gap in the fence stood aside and saluted for the UN car, and Mativi pulled up next to an ancient Boeing V-22 VTOL transport, in the crew door of which a portly black man in a bad safari suit sat juggling with mobile phones. The casings of the phones, Mativi knew, were colour coded to allow their owner to identify them. The Boeing had once been United Nations White. After too many years in the Congo, it was now Well-Used Latrine White.

Mativi examined what was being done at the far end of the containment area. The site was a mass of specialized combat engineering machinery. Mativi recognized one of the devices, a Japanese-made tractor designed for defusing unexploded nuclear munitions – or rather, for dealing with what happened when a human nuclear UXB disposal operative made a mistake. Hair trigger sensors on the tractor would detect the incipient gamma flare of a fission reaction, then fire a hundred and twenty millimetre shell into the nuke. This would kill the bomb disposal man and fill the area around the bomb with weapons-grade fallout, but probably save a few million civilians in the immediate area.

Mativi walked across the compound and yelled at the man in the Boeing. "Louis, what the *hell* are your UXB monkeys doing?"

Grosjean's head whipped round. "Oh, hello, Chet. We're

following standard procedure for dealing with an unexploded weaponized gamma source."

"Well, first off, this isn't a weapon –"

Grosjean's smile was contemptuous. "It's something that can annihilate the entire planet, and it isn't a *weapon*?"

"It's *thirty-nine* things that can annihilate the planet, and they're not weapons *any more*. Think about it. Would anyone use a weapon that would blow up the whole world?"

Grosjean actually appeared to seriously consider the possibility; then, he nodded to concede the point. "So what sort of weapon were these things part of?"

"Not weapons," corrected Mativi. "Think of them as weapons waste. They were the principal components in a Penrose Accelerator."

"You're making it up."

"You damn fool security guy, me weapons inspector. We've suspected the People's Democratic Republic of Congo used Penrose weapons in their war with the Democratic People's Republic of Congo for some time. They had guns capable of lobbing hundred tonne shells full of plague germs at Pretoria from a distance of four thousand kilometres, for instance. When we examined those guns after UNPEFORCONG overran their positions, what we found didn't fit. They had magnetic accelerators in their barrels, but at the sort of muzzle velocities they'd have had to have been using, the magnets in the barrels would only have been any use in aiming, not in getting the payload up to speed. And the breech of each weapon had been removed. *Something* had been accelerating those projectiles, but it wasn't magnetism, and it wasn't gunpowder. The projectiles were big, and they were moving *fast*. You remember that outbreak of airborne rabies in New Zealand two years back? That was one of theirs. A Congolese shell fired too hot and went into orbit. The orbit decayed. The shell came down. Thirteen years after the war. Gunpowder and magnetism don't do that."

"So what was it?"

"A Penrose accelerator. You get yourself a heavy-duty rotating mass, big enough to have stuff orbit round it, and you whirl ordnance round those orbits, contrary to the direction of the mass's rotation. Half of your ordnance separates from the payload, and drops into the mass. The *other* half gets kicked out to mind-boggling velocities. The trouble is, none of this works unless the mass is dense enough to have an escape velocity greater than light."

"A black hole."

"Yes. You have yourself thirty-nine charged rotating black holes, formerly used as artillery accelerators, now with nowhere to go. Plus another hole lodged precariously on the back of a tractor on the public highway halfway between here and Djelo-Binza. And the only way for us to find enough energy to get rid of them, I imagine, would be to use *another* black hole to kick them into orbit. They also give off gamma, almost constantly, as they're constantly absorbing matter. You point one of those UXB defuser tractors at them and throw the safety on the gun, and –"

"JESUS." Grosjean stared at the ground floor entrance where his men had been preparing to throw heavy artillery shells at the problem, jumped up, and began frantically waving his arms for them to stop. "*OUI! OUI! ARRÊTE! ARRÊTE!* And we thought getting rid of nuclear waste was difficult."

"Looks easy to me," said Mativi, nodding in the direction of the highway. Two trucks with UNSMATDEMRECONG livery, their suspensions hanging low, had stopped just short of the

military cordon in the eastbound lane. Their drivers had already erected signs saying *LIGHT HEAT HERE FOR DOLLARS*, and were handing out clear resin bricks that glowed with a soft green light to housewives who were coming out of the darkened prefabs nearby, turning the bricks over in their hands, feeling the warmth, haggling over prices.

"Is that what I think it is?" said Grosjean. "I should stop that. It's dangerous, isn't it?"

"Don't concern yourself with it right now. Those bricks can only kill one family at a time. Besides," said Mativi gleefully, "the city needs power, and Jean-Baptiste's men are only supplying a need, right?"

Ngoyi, still in the passenger seat of the Hyundai, stared sadly as his men handed out radionuclides, and could not meet Mativi's eyes. He reached in his inside pocket for the gun he had attempted to kill Mativi with, and began, slowly and methodically, to clear the jam that had prevented him from doing so.

"Once you've cordoned the area off," said Mativi, "we'll be handling things from that point onwards. I've contacted the IAEA myself. There's a continental response team on its way."

In the car, Ngoyi had by now worked the jammed bullet free and replaced it with another. At the Boeing, Grosjean's jaw dropped. "You have teams set up to deal with this *already*?"

"Of course. You don't think this is the first time this has happened, do you? It's the same story as with the A-bomb. As soon as physicists know it's possible, every tinpot dictator in the world wants it, and will do a great deal to get it, and certainly isn't going to tell us he's trying. Somewhere in the world at a location I am not aware of and wouldn't tell you even if I were, there is a stockpile of these beauties that would make your hair curl. I once spoke to a technician who'd just come back from there . . . I think it's somewhere warm, he had a sun-tan. He said there were aisles of the damn things, literally thousands of them. The UN are working on methods of deactivating them, but right now our best theoretical methods for shutting down a black hole always lead to catastrophic Hawking evaporation, which would be like a thousand-tonne nuclear warhead going off. And if any one of those things broke out of containment, even one, it would sink through the Earth's crust like a stone into water. It'd get to the Earth's centre and beyond before it slowed down to a stop – and then, of course, it'd begin to fall to the centre again. It wouldn't rise to quite the same height on the other side of the Earth, just like a pendulum, swinging slower and slower and slower. Gathering bits of Earth into itself all the time, of course, until it eventually sank to the centre of the world and set to devouring the entire planet. The whole Earth would get sucked down the hole, over a period which varies from weeks to centuries, depending on which astrophysicist you ask. And you know what?" – and here Mativi smiled evilly. This was always the good part.

"What?" Grosjean's Bantu face had turned whiter than a Boer's. From the direction of the car, Mativi heard a single, slightly muffled gunshot.

"We have no way of knowing whether we already missed one or two. Whether one or two of these irresponsible nations carrying out unauthorized black hole research dropped the ball. How would we know, if someone kept their project secret enough? How would we know there wasn't a black hole bouncing up and down like a big happy rubber ball inside the Earth right now? Gravitational anomalies would eventually begin to show themselves, I suppose – whether on seismometers or mass detectors. But our world might only have a few decades

to live – and we wouldn't be any the wiser.

"Make sure that cordon's tight, Louis."

Grosjean swallowed with difficulty, and nodded. Mativi wandered away from the containment site, flipping open his mobile phone. Miracle of miracles, even out here, it worked.

"Hello darling . . . No, I think it'll perhaps take another couple of days . . . Oh, the regular sort of thing. Not too dangerous. Yes, we did catch this one . . . Well, I did get shot at a *little*, but the guy missed. He was aiming on a purely Euclidean basis . . . Euclidean. I'll explain when I get home . . . Okay, well, if you have to go now then you have to go. I'll be on the 9am flight from Kinshasa."

He flicked the phone shut and walked, whistling, towards the Hyundai. There was a spiderweb of blood over the passenger side where Ngoyi had shot himself. *Still*, he thought, *that's someone else's problem. This car goes back into the pool tomorrow. At least he kept the side window open when he did it. Made a lot less mess than that bastard Lamant did in Quebec City. And they made me clean that car.*

He looked out at the world. "Saved you again, you big round bugger, and I hope you're grateful."

For the first time in a week, he was smiling.

Dominic is 37, of average height, with pleasing, symmetrical features. He lives in Northampton and works for a company beginning with B and ending in Arclaycard. In his spare time, he writes stuff which his Mum says is really good. He does not have a degree in Physics. If he wanted to obey the laws of Physics, he'd jolly well go out and buy a pair of kryptonite underpants. He also teaches kung fu and tai chi, but still gets pushed around by little old ladies.

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WOKEN FURIES
RICHARD MORGAN

Orion hb, 436pp £9.99

Peter Loftus writes:

Morgan's fourth novel sees him return to the ongoing saga of Takeshi Kovacs, and he doesn't waste any time turning the heat up for the ex-Envoy. We find Kovacs on Harlan's World, where his story began centuries ago. He's got a pocketful of cortical stacks, which store the minds of a group of priests he's just murdered, and the synthetic sleeve he is wearing is bleeding heavily from a blaster bolt to the ribs. Business as usual. Kovacs wants nothing more than to upload into a new body, but things don't work out and he's forced to lie low in a local bar. Of course, those of you who know Takeshi Kovacs will know lying low isn't his thing.

Before the night is out, and with the body count rising, Kovacs runs into Sylvie Oshima, Datatech Commander of a group of deComs, mercenaries clearing the areas around New Hokkaido of evolving weapons systems left over from The Unsettlement. Takeshi decides it's prudent to get out of New Hok for a while, and when Sylvie tells him of a new sleeve she can set him up with, he agrees to tag along with the deComs.

From there, the plot snowballs. Sylvie picks up some kind of data virus that may hold the personality construct of Quellcrist Falconer, Harlan's World's long dead revolutionary leader. Both the yakuza and the Brotherhood are screaming for Takeshi's blood. On top of that, Kovacs learns that somebody has taken a younger version of his

persona out of storage and sent it to kill him.

In the last few years, Richard Morgan has really taken the scene by storm. His first novel *Altered Carbon* won the Phillip K. Dick award in 2003 and has been optioned by Warner Bros. *Broken Angels* continued the Kovacs story, although in more of a military trope than the Marlowe-in-the-future *Altered Carbon*. *Woken Furies* is probably more similar to *Broken Angels* than *Altered Carbon* – still noir, but with that military edge. Kovacs is still working through his pathological rage at authority figures, and it is his quest to find out who he really is that drives the novel. This thread is excellently brought to fruition when the two copies of Kovacs finally meet.

As with all of Morgan's work, *Woken Furies* is gritty. Kovacs compares his

hometown of Newpest to a cheap whore. Much of the dialogue is spat out or comes from between clenched teeth. All of which is fine, but the uncompromising determination of both Morgan and Kovacs to see human existence in such bleak terms means that there is little to uplift or comfort in the book. I found that this made for slightly heavy going in places.

Morgan has claimed that this is one of his most personal books yet, and indeed, much of the titular 'fury' comes straight from the author himself. The episode when Kovacs berates the priest's wife on the Haiduci's Daughter is a thinly veiled expression of Morgan's own political views concerning the status of women in some Middle-Eastern countries. The general negativity of the book stems from the author's own lack of faith in humankind to become aware of its own problems. Of course, Morgan has every right to put across his political viewpoint. It's his book. But with each successive novel, it's getting harder to ignore the politics.

Having said all that, I would still recommend *Woken Furies*. Kovacs' character is one of the strongest to come out of sf in recent years, and his universe has been crafted with vast depth and detail. The social and technological environment is rich, believable and absorbing, pulling the reader in. Kovacs never backs out of a fight, and with him around we know that the bad guys (and everybody else in a two kilometre radius) are going to get torched. Real death.



DEVICES AND DESIRES K.J. PARKER

Orbit pb, 548pp, £12.99

Stephanie Burgis writes:

How can a kind, compassionate man bring himself to order the death of thousands? In K.J. Parker's *Devices and Desires* that question is explored from a variety of angles, as three neighbouring countries are all drawn into a genocidal war resulting from one individual act of betrayal and injustice.

The two competing duchies of Vadana and Eremia, led respectively by Duke Valens and Duke Orsea, are finally settling into a wary mutual peace, despite the simmering tension created by Valens' secret romantic friendship with Orsea's wife Veatriz. Both duchies are still in a quasi-Renaissance state of technology, driven by a feudal system of hierarchical, inherited duties, and increasingly dependent on the nearby technological powerhouse of the Perpetual Mezentine Republic. While Vadana and Eremia have wasted the past century on infighting, the Perpetual Republic has had its own Industrial Revolution and become a vast, machine-like society devoted to the development of dazzling technology to rigorously exacting and religiously revered Specifications. Trade secrets are not allowed to escape the Republic, for the sake of their worldwide economic monopoly. When a Mezentine engineer is betrayed by a friend and sentenced to death for a technical Abomination, his escape to Eremia – and his determination to regain his wife and daughter, no matter what the cost – unleashes a bloody series of events that will sweep across all three countries.

Parker's gift lies in the quiet, understated humour that underlies this book of intrigue, revenge and bloodshed. The characters are, to a man (although not, interestingly, to a woman), full of doubts, endlessly self-questioning and gifted with self-deprecating senses of humour. The Mezentine military is run by the Department of Necessary Evil. There are

no simple 'bad guys' in this world.

Devices and Desires is a sneakily powerful book about the absurdities as well as the tragedies of war, and as such, it has enormous contemporary relevance.

There are certainly flaws that could be picked out. The two central female characters, who inspire so much of the bloodshed, are surprisingly flat as compared to their male counterparts. Also, there is one scene near the end, when the Mezentine engineer decides to sit down with a victim and explain his schemes in detail, which pushed my personal credulity to the breaking-point. Still, it's rare to find a high-fantasy novel as intelligent and compassionate as this one, and it should be celebrated.



HINTERLAND DAVID BARNETT

Immanion Press pb, 300pp, £12.99

Bob Keery writes: In this first-novel, a thoroughly modern young man comes

face-to-face with the dangerous half-realities lurking between the corners of contemporary urban Britain. In fine tradition it starts with a taxi-ride to somewhere somehow different – an oddly unmemorable nightclub down a street the years left stranded. The next morning, what should be a walk in the park turns wild, and the town reveals an unsettling side of itself. A brooding sense of long-buried mystery and personal significance, suspended on strands of paranoia and coincidence, follows David to the office the next day, where he works as a reporter on the local daily paper. A rash of resurgent local legends and an art viewing later, he's not quite back to normal. Far outside his conscious awareness, the comforting drone of daily life becomes a feverish buzz, heard in every echo of a place that's becoming distinctly non-ordinary.

Although something more obscure and profound than a good reporter's nose keeps drawing him away from his reliably diverse life of drink, drugs, pubs, clubs, friends, family and lovers the

narration is careful not to follow too far too fast. For the most part the prose sticks to a cool but emotive new-journalism, so realistic it could be happening outside the window. David's social and personal life is presented with rare involvement and honesty, which succeeds in distracting from the generic expectations of a fantasy novel. The fantasies are those of the occult/fortean fringe, invoking the mysteries of landscape and territory that fascinate everyone from John Bunyan to Iain Sinclair. The Good Folk, wicked elves and goblins of yore have died out from concrete and twenty-four hour news; their evolutionary niche has been filled by vanishing lands and UFOs. Suffering the burden of something others have learned to ignore, David nears a kind of awful redemption, becomes the friend-of-a-friend who gets it in every tall-tale you've ever heard. Sparks fly in the heady, hedonistic tone and insight of emotion – David's voice is sophisticated and social, urbane as well as urban, confidently mainstream but wearing its counter-culture credentials just so.

Long before he realises, David is lost tottering down the slopes of Chapel Perilous (to pick a reference), propelled by something other than journalistic instinct. Friend and foe are chasing him, life and love are collapsing into conspiracy, and the streets speak in glimpses of secrets and memories. Real life makes less and less sense, but sometimes you go through the danger of a rabbit hole to lay the foundations of something else. David's compulsion to dig, even as it destroys him, almost becomes a bleak justification for the perceived intrusions and distortions of modern communications media. Mankind's need to understand itself uncovers things best ignored but this, the dark-side of the libertarian coda 'Information Wants to Be Free', is a natural by-product of the Irish thinker De Selby's all-pervasive 'urge to gossip' and integral to evolution. After all, the words a world produces might seem empty or for weasels, but they're its everyday life, the very stuff of people's minds – first read, then real.



It's rare for the stuff of such arch paranoia and re-awakening scenarios to be couched in the terms of a newspaper or character-driven blockbuster. The result is a tender, relevant anti-fantasy that doesn't trip on its hipness and comes off like an alien abduction party. The styles work like devils to mask the climax, which sends shocks and new alignments of meaning backwards in time to subvert even David's birth.

In any story dealing with both things magic and things real, the keen process of fiction can hardly help but reveal evidence of a certain tricky fact: the magic was real all along and the real is its own kind of magic. The story-traveller's feet walk from fairy glades to abandoned estates not through a shift in time or space, but of perspective, and the reason your ancestors warned against going to see the 'Good Folk' was because you'd return bearing the stigma of lunacy, or if you're really unlucky, wisdom.



THE RISEN EMPIRE SCOTT WESTERFELD

Orbit pb, 262pp, £12.99

Chris Hill writes: The empire of the title, referred to as the Eighty Worlds, has been ruled by its Emperor for sixteen hundred years. His power is based on the discovery of a lifeform which can enter a symbiotic relationship with humans to give apparent immortality. The only catch seems to be that you have to die first before the symbiote can be given. The future Emperor was driven to search for such a treatment in an attempt to treat his dying sister; hence she is known as the Reason for the Empire. The Rix are separate group of humans who see it as their duty to spread the advanced artificial intelligences they worship throughout the galaxy. Some years earlier this led them into a conflict with the Eighty Worlds, a conflict that the Rix appeared to lose.

The story starts in the middle of a hostage situation: the Reason has been kidnapped by Rix agents on the planet of Legis XV and Captain Laurent Zai of the Imperial Frigate *Lynx* is engaged in a rescue attempt. He knows that if he fails he will have committed an Error of Blood and will be obliged to take his own life. Back on the Emperor's home world, Zai's lover, Nara Oxham, is a senator in a party opposed to the use of the immortality treatment since they believe that it will lead to the stagnation of the human race.

Much has been written about the new renaissance of big, galaxy-spinning Space Opera in the last decade or so, but there seems to be a quieter renaissance taking place – the incursion of relativistic physics into these stories. A growing group of writers have seen the possibilities that this has for generating ideas. Probably the person who has used this to best effect is Alistair Reynolds but *The Risen Empire* also uses real physics as a tool to distance various parts of the story from each other.

Another nice idea that Westerfeld uses here is having much of the fighting being between remote drones piloted by specialists who are kept in well-protected parts of the star ship. Although the motivations of the (many) characters are seldom complex, Westerfeld avoids drawing them as too black-or-white (with the exception of the Emperor, who is charming but obviously a villain): Zai is obsessive and will sacrifice anyone to what he believes is right, his second-in-command, Hobbes, is tempted to mutiny and the one Rix you get to know is shown to be, ultimately, very human.

The Risen Empire shares a similar set up to the recent Walter Jon Williams series 'Dread Empire's Fall'. In both we have an empire under threat, socially mismatched lovers, the man is at the other end of a relativistic time tunnel while the woman fights the war at home. Where *The Risen Empire* has the slight edge over 'Dread Empire's Fall' is that at least we are asked to question whether the empire is actually worth saving; the other series seems to assume that the Empire is a Good Thing, even if being run by bad people. However, it has to be said that Williams' background is worked out in better detail.

The main problem with *The Risen Empire* is that it is an old-fashioned affair; the innovations of the likes of MacLeod, Banks or Greenland seem to have passed Westerfeld by. Apart from the aforementioned use of some ideas from modern physics, the book could have been published any time in the last thirty years. Even the relationships between the characters are not particularly adult.

It is not clear whether the book is the first volume of a series. Certainly the ending leaves many loose ends that you would expect to have been tied up if no sequel is intended. Ultimately, *The Risen Empire* has the virtue of being extremely entertaining, with likeable characters and an exciting plot, but it is not going to change anyone's world.



THE DESTINY MASK MARTIN SKETCHLEY

Simon & Schuster pb, 369pp, £10.99

Paul Raven writes: The second book in Sketchley's Structure series, *The*

Destiny Mask picks up events twenty-two years on from the previous episode. Alexander Delgado now leads a ragged terrorist group from an underwater base on a darkly future Earth, making desperate forays against his nemesis (and ex-boss) General Myson. With him are his co-conspirators from the previous book, and Cascari, the half Serriat child he fathered on Lycern, late child-bearer to the Serriatic throne. Myson also has a son, allegedly by him, born of the same alien. A crisis of succession occurs on the Serriat homeworld, an event that propels all the main characters toward it, as Myson and Delgado both manoeuvre to get their boys onto the throne.

Anti-heroes are notoriously difficult to write, and Delgado is a very hard character to care about. His background in the same military-establishment machine that Myson controls serves him well as he batters his way through all obstacles and opponents, with scant regard for the consequences. He is also served well by serendipity and instinctive perceptions, as lucky escapes from capture and vehicle chases move the plot along in leaps and bounds, with the enemy body count piling up in synch with the page numbers.

Sketchley writes a good brisk fight scene, and comes up with a few nice ideas for his settings, with a vaguely Peter Hamilton vibe to some of it, but lacking the sweeping description. The plot is advanced more by action than intrigue, and Delgado as a character doesn't let you know much about what he's thinking; he's too busy working out who to kill next. The background has some intriguing ideas, but you don't get to find out much detail of the environments. It is SF of a very different style and feel to the other British writers of the moment, who tend to lean a lot more towards complex intrigues and vast world-building, and a much heavier style of prose.

If you're looking for an action-driven tale with plenty of bad guys getting wasted, and an SF setting as the backdrop, this could be the series for you.

NON-FICTION


THE HOLY MACHINE
CHRIS BECKETT

Wildside Press pb, 242pp, \$17.95

Tony Ballantyne writes:

Let's waste no time: this book is incredible. Chris

Beckett has obviously decided what he wants to say and then gone ahead and done so in 250 beautifully written pages. He has hidden a grain of truth away towards the end of the novel, a piece of original thinking I have encountered in no other work, SF or otherwise. Not content with that, he has made characters that live and breathe, animated his world with vivid descriptions, and stitched the whole thing through with brisk dialogue spun straight from life. And all of this is propelled along by a plot that is as tight as it is gripping.

So what's it all about?

In the near future, religious fundamentalism has swept the world. Those who refuse to accept the beliefs of their new leaders are tried for blasphemy. Those found guilty are tortured, or worse. A fortunate few manage to escape to the city state of Illyria, where scientists, now unwelcome anywhere else, use their advanced technology to defend themselves from the hostile countries around.

However, it gradually becomes apparent that Illyria has become as fundamentalist in its own way as the world it has retreated from, refusing to accept anything that cannot be measured or proven.

When George discovers that Lucy, a robot prostitute, has developed self awareness, he finds that neither Illyrian philosophy nor religious belief are willing to acknowledge what he has found. His efforts to protect the developing consciousness of the machine lead him on a journey from his home to the Holy Machine of the title.

There are few faults here, Beckett rarely puts a foot wrong. Maybe sometimes the opposing sides in the story seem just a little too black and white: it seems a little unlikely that all the countries of the world but one should lurch into religious fundamentalism, and that this should be true of all religions – perhaps there should have been some explanation for this. Otherwise, this is an incredibly accomplished book.

THE SCIENCE OF THE HITCHHIKER'S GUIDE TO THE GALAXY
MICHAEL HANLON

Macmillan Palgrave hb, 195pp, £16.99/\$24.95

Steve Jeffery writes: *The Science of the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* is the latest in a rash of media franchise popular science tie-in books which range from the playful and surprisingly authoritative, such as *The Science of Discworld* (now in a third volume, and authored by respected scientists and fans Ian Stewart and Jack Cohen), through the inevitable *The Physics of Star Trek* and *Star Wars* to the seeming opportunistic and vaguely desperate, such as *The Science of Superman* and *The Science of Harry Potter*.

But perhaps we should not judge a book by its bedfellows. Michael Hanlon, author of *The Science of the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (henceforth abbreviated as *SHG*) is Science Editor at *The Daily Mail* and has two non-genre popular science books, *The Real Mars* (2001) and *The Worlds of Galileo* (2004) – the latter on the space probe rather than the man – under his belt.

As Hanlon admits, much of the 'science' in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* is "clearly bonkers." Adams started writing the *Guide* back in 1978, where the big questions of cosmology and the structure and fate of the universe were starting to take a grip on public consciousness. The passage of time has showed, if anything, that many of the theories physicists and cosmologists have developed – inflation, superstrings, M-theory, dark matter and energy – are every bit as deranged (to most people's concept of "common sense") as anything Adams came up with.

Hanlon takes us though a number of these areas, to investigate and explain current thinking, although not, in several cases, to explain the theories themselves: some of those defy explanation to anyone without at least a higher degree in maths or physics. Hanlon's chapter on quantum entanglement had me siding with Einstein's that this is "spooky action at a distance." Where the transfer of quantum state information shades into matter transference – here Hanlon temporarily abandons *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* in favour of the more familiar *Star Trek* transporter – on the

basis that at the quantum level the particle is its state information, arguments from physics collide with those of philosophy.

There are times when some quite fundamental disagreements between different areas of science can result in certain chapters appearing to contradict others: for example the apparent stalemate in research into AI machine consciousness against the theory that our universe is overwhelmingly likely to be a simulation rather than the real thing. A Phil Dickian concept, if there ever was one.

Hanlon writes in an easy, chatty style while trotting out mind boggling concepts and statistics (after a certain number of zeros, all numbers become meaningless). Although there is nothing that will be new to regular readers of *New Scientist*, *SHG* is essentially a straight popular science title on some of the more arcane areas and problems of current science (most of the recommended reading titles are from the last six years) from quantum effects and virtual particles to infinite or multiple universes and the Fermi paradox, cheekily packaged to tie in with the release of the *Hitchhiker* film.

BUILDING SCI-FI MOVIESCAPES
MATT HANSON

Rotovision hb, 176pp, £27.50/\$39.95

Andy Cox writes: Subtitled 'The Science Behind the Fiction', this is a visually awesome showcase of some of the most impressive SF and Fantasy films, from the pre-digital era of 2001: *A Space Odyssey* to *Innocence: Ghost in the Shell 2*, which "pushes the envelope of what we know of as science fiction, and what we think of as animation," and *Casshern* (get it on DVD now. I did!), which "marks the future of science fiction."

Matt Hanson takes a behind-the-scenes look at how the digital cities and spacescapes in these movies are created, and details the key developments in technology, including advances in computer visualisation. Directors, production designers and art directors reveal their visions, inspirations and references, and discuss the digital techniques they used. Complementing the text are previously unpublished sketches and concept drawings, alongside copious stills from the finished movies.

It's a beautifully designed book, a work of art in itself. Recommended! 

COLLECTIONS

MEN AND CARTOONS

JONATHAN LETHEM

Faber & Faber pb, 160pp, £10.99

Iain Emsley writes: Jonathan Lethem has become a conundrum; he is writing genre from an outside perspective, yet he is one of our own – a fan of genre. *Amnesia Moon* reworked Oz and the recent *Fortress of Solitude* examined his growing up and love for comics. *Men and Cartoons* is a collection whose contradiction is apparent in the title. It is about Lethem's passion for them as he grew up and the changing relationships therein and between people as they grew up.

'The Dystopianist, Thinking of His Rival, Is Interrupted by a Knock on the Door' is a strange story which explores the way that we think about genre and how we look for differences to achieve difference. It subtly moves from a pulp tale to a Coleridgean muse upon the nature and quality of his craft. His changing relationship with the genre that he loves is also charted in 'Super Goat Man' in which we meet a minor superhero, fading away in the corner of the city, his decline intersected by the narrator at various stages of his life, bound to him through common, yet tangential, experience.

The void of growing up and leaving lovers is another theme explored with a forlorn delicacy in a drinking game along the lines of spin the bottle which goes awry in 'The Vision' and 'The Spray', in which the police leave a spray that discovers everything that has been stolen in a break in, that is then used in a game. He defines the awkwardness as the characters move out of teenagerdom and into partnerships with a sharp pencil that he uses to great effect in 'Planet Big Zero', styled like Robert Crumb, in which he shows how some people grow up and some stay as they are.

Letem writes with a refreshing efficiency and sparsity of words, portraying a series of strange and bizarre tales. There is a sense of loneliness in the inevitable change that comes, a disappointment in how life has changed but there is an enviable peace in these stories. The contradiction that is inherent in each of these stories gives rise to a collection is intriguing and strangely fulfilling, if somewhat brief.



LITTLE MACHINES

PAUL MCAULEY

PS Publishing hb, 328pp, no price listed

Lavie Tidhar writes: This collection seems to have slipped under the radar; it shouldn't have. The seventeen SF stories in *Little Machines* are some of the best I've read in recent time, revealing not only a sense of the history of science fiction and an obvious love for the genre – nearly every major character mentions a link to SF at some point in the stories – but a thorough understanding of what makes science fiction work. Strong Ideas are combined with exciting narration, and McAuley runs the gamut here, from the far future to the alternate past and passing all points in between.

My favourite stories are two: 'Residuals', a brilliant and creepy exploration of pulp invasion narratives – and what happens *after* – co-written with Kim Newman, and 'Cross Roads Blues', a story of time-travel and alternate history set around the little-known character of blues musician Robert Johnson which imagines the different possible worlds in a way reminiscent of Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*. This is surely not a coincidence: the opening story, 'The Two Dicks', looks at another alternative history in which the great genius of SF became a mainstream literary hero – and someone seems to be manipulating history to keep him that way... There is also a nod to Larry Niven in 'How We Lost The Moon, A True Story by Frank W. Allen' (which I won't spoil) and this spoof narrative is echoed in the very funny 'A Very British History', the true story of the British space programme. Two stories that were also a pleasure to encounter are reprinted from Novacon convention booklets: 'Alien TV' and 'Before the Flood', both dealing with the idea that an alien culture is sending out thousands of TV channels towards Earth. The first is a thoughtful meditation on the loss of a sense of wonder; the second, a grim tale of a suicide cult inspired by the aliens.

I also loved 'The Proxy', a story first published in an anthology of Internet stories. It's a story about a book runner who follows the trail of one impossible book (offered for sale online, of course) to a very unusual source... 'Under Mars', meanwhile, is a homage to all the old Mars stories with a dose of PKD thrown in – and takes place entirely in a

theme park, the theme being Mars, of course: it comes complete with a Bradbury section and War of the Worlds.

Some of the stories are slighter. 'I Spy' is an effective but curiously unmoving horror story whose protagonist is an SF fan. 'The Secret of my Success', another horror story and this time featuring a writer, imagines a new kind of divide between the rich and famous and everybody else. 'Danger: Hard Hack Area' is a short-short report from a biopunks convention, while 'The Madness of Crowds' is about the power of pheromones and a possible conspiracy – it failed to leave a lasting impression.

Things pick up again with more hard SF: '17' is a dark and compelling story of a girl growing up under horrifying conditions on a far-away world and of her one way out, while 'Interstitial' is even grimmer, about the literal end of the human race – still fighting each other, of course. 'All Tomorrow's Parties' is a far-future story loosely tied to the author's Confluence books; it features a post-human organising one last party on a makeshift Earth – and many fragmented personalities of Hemingway. And 'The Rift' is an effective story of cryptozoology – about an expedition to a lost-world in South America.

Conspiracies, alternate histories and a genuine concern with the future of a flawed humanity run through the stories in *Little Machines*, and McAuley's themes are always informed by a genuine curiosity and understanding of the changes affecting the present's shift into the future. Highly recommended.



NOVELLAS


MY DEATH
LISA TUTTLE

PS Publishing pb, 93pp, £10

Sandy Auden writes: Lisa Tuttle's new novella, 'My Death', is a delicately

rounded tale with a supernatural flavour. It's a relatively short dose of fiction, but Tuttle hasn't compromised on the depth of the story, she's simply chosen her words more thoughtfully.

Told in the first person, it follows an unnamed writer as she embarks on a new literary project. Meeting with her editor after a hiatus from writing, our protagonist decides to write a biography of a woman she's admired all her life, Helen Ralston. Ralston was an artist and fellow writer with a stormy past, including affairs with married men and an attempted suicide. As our protagonist discovers more of Ralston's past, she also uncovers many strange similarities to her own life. When she arranges to meet with Ralston, now an old lady, it precipitates a series of even stranger happenings...

Entering the life of our protagonist is made oh-so-easy by Tuttle's effortless style. Atmospheric rainy days and empty homes, yearnings for lost ones and intense curiosity, all entice you into the story. As with the best submersion fantasy, the story is like an in-body experience; and these bodies are warm and all too human, with history, opinions and emotional baggage.

This closeness to the characters helps to maintain your interest in the story, and it's combined with a subtle structure of intrigue, where curious details are revealed like a trail of breadcrumbs for the reader to follow. Information is accumulated until the whole picture materialises and understanding dawns. It's all so gentle and all so very effective that the concluding twist can catch you quite unawares.


APPROACHING OMEGA
ERIC BROWN

Telos Publishing pb, 117pp, £7.99

Sandy Auden writes: It's easy to see the influences of the silver screen on Eric Brown's action-packed science fiction

novella, 'Approaching Omega'.

The story focuses on Latimer, who is leading a small team of technicians responsible for the welfare of thousands of colonists fleeing Earth to make a new home on another planet. Earth is in a self-destructive spiral to ecological failure. The only chance to keep the race alive lies with the spaceship *Dauntless*, and its five hangars of colonists in cold sleep.

There are strong overtones of *Alien* when Latimer and his team are awoken from their deep sleep early. A meteor shower has severely damaged their ship and the central computer is down. Switching to auxiliary power, Latimer's team secure the ship as best they can and go back into hibernation leaving the maintenance robots to repair the ship while the crew rest in stasis.

When Latimer next awakes, some one thousand years later, he discovers that a very nasty situation has evolved. In true *Star Trek* style, human directives have been corrupted and re-interpreted with deadly consequences. The situation escalates rapidly now, as Latimer and his team begin a relentless and violent struggle to save as many lives as possible and take control of the situation once more.

To Brown's credit though, he takes these obvious science fiction influences and moulds them into something very much his own. It's a solid tale that flows logically and even delivers character development as well as almost continual action – a difficult achievement in the shorter novella format. The conclusion, when you skid breathlessly up to it, is thought provoking and unusual; a welcome tonic to the standard SF movie approaches.


URNS AND CHANCES
JULIET MCKENNA

PS Publishing pb, 118pp, £10

Iain Emsley writes: Chaz Brenchley's introduction makes the claim that

fantasy is always seen as the literature of reversion, a mode that will always seek to maintain its own status quo. Juliet McKenna's novella looks to move her own lands forward and to change the established order. The country of Lescar was formed from the collapse of the Tormalin empire and now the dukes are forming strategic alliances to control the land. Meanwhile the ordinary people go about their jobs and

farm their land. When two Duke's sons come to blows, the delicate balance of power is disturbed and the land is sent into war.

McKenna focusses upon the human elements and comes to the realisation that minute changes will affect the ordinary people, that conflict will change the individuals involved. McKenna follows the story from differing perspectives, on the front line and in the build up, exploring the human aspects of fantasy. 'Turns and Chances' adds to the writers trying to change epic fantasy writing and delivers an interesting and believable story. More importantly, it shows that McKenna has developed in her writing and breaking away from role-playing based scenarios.



UNDER THE PENITENCE
MARY GENTLE

PS Publishing pb, 76pp, £10

Iain Emsley writes: Mary Gentle's writing rarely gives quarter and 'Under the Penitence' does not deviate from this. Gentle extends the First History in a Cabell-esque fashion, giving it a life of its own.

After a murder attempt from his own mother, Ilario escapes Iberia for the Carthage, still under the Penitence, his only crime to be born a hermaphrodite and to have the king be bored by him.

On arrival he is robbed and sold into slavery, bought by the royal book-buyer who recognises him for what he is and lets him paint. Ilario's mother finds him and lets him know about the politics behind her attempted murder as well as his family history. Rekhmire, his owner, finds his father as well as stands by Ilario as he makes the decision to follow his father or to go his own way as an artist.

The lack of sword fighting reminds us that fantasy does not need to have fighting and that conversation can be equally vicious, even when it is apparently being straight. Perhaps this is a story of acceptance, we are left in the cold about this. What makes this book exciting is that it makes the reader think about the central character and the notion of possession and the relationships between master and slave. Gentle allows Ilario grow up in the short story and the reader is left intrigued by ending, typically left open. 

JEFF LINT

THE RETRIAL
ADMIRING A CLASSIC LINTIAN HERO

Steve Aylett writes: Jeff Lint's

interpretation of Kafka's *The Trial* was that the guilt felt by K – and depended upon by the state – derives from his having allowed the state to become so strong in the first place. K therefore ultimately accepts his punishment.

In Lint's story 'The Retrial', K feels no such guilt because he allows no such influence and storms into every circumstance like a berserk Touretter, somehow spanning the most chasmic beartraps by sheer velocity of mischief.

Lint's K is a classic Lintian hero – individual to the point of parallel-dimensionality. In his novel *Jelly Result* Lint would portray the maintenance of oppression by automated human patch-and-repair, those dependent systems simultaneously and constantly preying on the life force of its maintainers. This is Lint's idea of hell and he revels in the hero's disengagement from it. His attempt at an Asimovian short, 'The Robot Who Couldn't Be Bothered', portrays a robot whose apparently faulty inactivity is discovered to be the result of 'eleven million nodes of personal consideration'. The entire second half of the novel *I Am a Centrifuge* is taken up with a volley of justified sarcasm so detailed and complete as to have its own visible lungs and nervous system. The hero in Lint's story 'Bless' awakes one morning to find that he has no tentacles. Alarmed, he dashes out to discover that nobody else has any tentacles either and all claim in bafflement never to have had any. As Michael Hersch has observed, the metaphor points up "a moral or ethical sensibility which, unheld and unrecognized by anyone else on the planet, is not communicable." In most Lint stories this sensibility is that of honesty and independent thought.

In 'The Retrial', Joseph K visits the zoo one morning to be greeted by two warders, Franz and Willem, who tell him he's under arrest. He laughs good-naturedly, asking to see their underwear. They refuse, and this lack of reciprocity – their assumption that he must obey their commands while they need not obey his – is what seems to spark K's apparently uncooperative attitude. An Inspector is

stead scowling nearby but since no introduction or instruction is given and all is left to some unspoken assumption, K begins to shudder in place like a dodgy steam tank, his convulsions building as though toward some terrible outburst. At the apex his head sags like a bag, splitting to release precisely eleven scorpions onto the ground. K himself collapses like a rotted scarecrow and soon, kicked and scattered by the fleeing crowd, is no longer really in evidence. He is at the court, kicking the outer wall of the Usher's cabin. "I'm naked," he thought, almost amazed: 'First being born, and now this. No trousers for me.'" When grabbed by K the Usher sees that the complicated epaulets on K's shoulders are actually the skulls of rabbits. He pleads with K to get off, that he has his own troubles, but K is adamant about doing what he sees as his duty. Finally four under-ushers try to pull them both out of the cabin but are foiled. The scene cuts to what appears to be several days later, as the Usher lays inert amid a jumble of steaming wreckage. There is a strange slamming sound as the Usher's eyes start open.

Thus begins a course of what Jean-Marie Guerin has called "ecstatic disregard" in relation to memo-level fascism: "Without this undercurrent of beatific irreverence it is impossible to pin down Lint's Joseph K's complete lack of need or desire to become involved with the processes of oppression. It should be noted also that the 'berserk stenographer' style in which Lint relates the story is important in allowing these situations to actually appear less philosophically interesting than they are."

Lint's K tells the story 'Beside the Law', in which a man from the country comes to the door seeking admittance to the Law, but the guard says he can't come in now. So the man constructs a precise replica of the door and locates it beside the first one, placing a sign above it for "\$20 a blowjob" and waiting for trade, which is brisk. Finally, when the guard at the first door is about to die, he asks why people stopped coming to his door. "That door could be profitable only for you," the man from the country says. "And now I'm going to close it."

Like Kafka's K, Lint's has a mind of his own, but unlike that K, he has a breathtaking intuition for the lateral response: a sort of laser-guided effrontery. When asked where he was on a particular evening, K replies: "Well, I'll tell you – if you have any money?" Outraged, the

Magistrate's response is cut short by his perceiving what seems to be a mere sheaf of undulating bacon fibres where K had previously been standing.

Anyone who has actually broken official protocol will know that at best it sends its agents into a sort of contentless whirl which does not have the vibrancy of honest panic, nor even that of genuine surprise – they seem merely to swerve from familiar bureaucratic rails onto some of the minor, less used branches of evasion. Nothing is ever changed, admitted or learnt. Yet in the world of 'The Retrial' some effect can be had; perhaps by the sheer diagonal intensity of K's responses. Consider the cathedral scene – while you or I might merely windmill our arms and puff our cheeks out a bit, K delivers a roundhouse to the priest by detonating into a perfumed cloud of dandelion seeds and buff-coloured smoke. The priest, who had been "smiling like a warship" only seconds before, now crouches on the floor like a spider, "karking and keening" – he seems to have been both deafened and confused by the blast.

Recent critics have suggested that the satirical excesses of Lint heroes are a result of intense tetra-neutron activity, supposedly explaining their combination of precision and apparent chaos. Hypercomplex satire operates by applying social rules in the 'wrong' contexts such as those of logic, morality or honesty, and the four-prong tetra-neutron cluster (the four neutrons of which will arrive simultaneously if fired at a carbon target) would seem the perfect structure for it – all the more entertainingly so as the phenomena's existence is doubted. If you tweak the laws of physics to allow four neutrons to bind together, all kinds of chaos ensues (*Journal of Physics*, vol 29, 1.9). It would mean that the mix of elements formed after the big bang was inconsistent with what most people now believe and, even worse, the matter created would be far too heavy for the current model to cope.

The theory stated in Lint's story 'Death by Fred' is that "sabotage is best accomplished by channeling bad luck." In Lint, until you're an individual, you're not in contention. This is why Lint could never write about the sort of characters that appeared in other people's books. Almost every scene has a sort of surreal exaltation to it.

At the moment his case is due to be heard, K is watching the lions at the zoo, his eyes full of tears. Two men approach

and, their arms entwined with his on either side of him, begin to walk him through the city. K begins smiling, the grin seeming to become broader than his face. Finally they arrive at an abandoned quarry. The two men take out a butcher knife and begin passing it to each other in a threatening manner. He is apparently supposed to take it and plunge it into himself. But without aid of the knife a red ace of hearts blooms at his chest and spreads quickly to stain his entire body and head. He has become a pillar of blood in the shape of a man, which soon becomes semi-transparent. It fades until only his Cheshire-cat grin remains, a miniature sunset which whispers echoing as it disappears: "Like a god!"

This article is not part of it but Aylett has written a biography of Jeff Lint, entitled *LINT* (see review below).

LINT

STEVE AYLETT

Thunder's Mouth Press pb, 240 pp, \$14.95

Rick Kleffel writes: After appearances in spoof articles beginning in *The 3rd*

Alternative, Jeff Lint takes on three and more dimensions in *Lint*, Steve Aylett's entertaining fictional biography of a


troubled science fiction writer. Aylett follows the journey of this eternal outsider through three generations of writing and culture. He unleashes so many arrows in so many directions the reader starts to feel a bit like a pincushion, but he at least has the good grace to hit the majority of his satiric targets.

The usual journey we encounter in a faux biography has the created character take the form of the ultimate insider. From birth to death, they happen to meet with the high, the mighty and the magnificent, all on a shambling life's journey. What Aylett does here is to invert that journey. Lint is not the ultimate unheralded insider but instead the ultimate unheralded outsider. He's ejected from every club that anyone would reasonably want to be aligned with. The result of the venom aimed at him is that he emerges as a strangely touching figure. His obnoxious and oblivious behaviour assures that every time his talent threatens to bring him to the notice of the public at large, he is instead given a kick to his keester and sent on his merry way.

That merry way is made much merrier by virtue of the talent that Aylett brings to the proceedings. Yes, *Lint* does hit all the genre notes. We see a page from his

rejected script for an episode of *Star Trek*, and he authors an absolutely mad book on the Kennedy assassination. The book covers are a highlight here, from *The Jelly Result to I Blame Ferns*. Lint's screenplay for *Patton* is a scream – as described by Aylett. He makes the most of his form, and gives us just the hilarious highlights from the mad mind of Jeff Lint.

Lint's prose, as Aylett tells us, was even trippier than that of his more heralded contemporary, Philip K. Dick. The two lives share many similarities, and readers who enjoy the fiction of Philip K. Dick will surely find a lot to like. Aylett's prose is consistently amazing. He is clearly a phenomenal talent, with an ability to write a sentence unlike any that will ever enter your brain via your eyes. His grasp of grammar itself is positively science fictional. Some of his surreal images are deeply disturbing, but the words he uses to unfurl them are gorgeous.

Lint is clearly the work of a mind in the advanced stages of both creative genius and insanity. There are so many memorable and repeatable one-liners here that you'll want to take notes. Make sure you do, because this is an experience you deserve to profit from. Or as Jeff Lint puts it, "When the abyss gazes into you, bill it." 

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NOTTINGHAM
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JOHN CLUTE: SCORES

ARABIAN WINE
GREGORY FEELEY

Upper Montclair, New Jersey: Temporary Culture, 197pp, \$50

TOKYO CANCELLED
RANA DASGUPTA

London: Fourth Estate, 383pp, £15.99

IN THE PALACE OF REPOSE
HOLLY PHILLIPS

Canton, Ohio: Prime Books, 203pp, \$29.95

It might be an idea to start with noise. The literatures of the fantastic – sf in particular – are suffused with noise: the noise of genre gears switching; the tattoo of obedience to those rules and conventions which are being adhered to, and the seismic ticks as young writers arraign their parents for the anxieties of influence that haunt their adolescent nights; and shaping all this noise a deeper noise of change, because these literatures – especially science fiction – have been bound for two centuries to the wheel of Time, and that is what they are all about. Ever since the invention of the Future between 1750 and 1800, they (we) have twisted and turned to the spring dance of the world from the God Arena we humans used to inhabit into Mission Statement Country – a dance of transformations now culminating (I think) in what one might quite precisely describe as a dodecacophony, as an ‘instructed chaos’ that maybe marks a completion in the history of Western World. So what is it with Gregory Feeley?

Most alternate histories – **Arabian Wine** is, barely, one of these – sing the wrath of change. They are all about getting somewhere by other means. *Arabian Wine* does not so utter. Its lips are sealed. It is the most silent work of sf I think I may have ever read. It is a meditation, an elegy, a tocsin; it shapes itself around an absence of change, hovers on a thin partition between noise and death. It is a thought experiment in saying No. Sing, Goddess, the silence of the tomb.

We are in early seventeenth-century Venice, a time when the ‘mind’ of Europe as a whole seems – in retrospect – to have begun to chafe at the constraints of the God Arena. Within a few years, the kind of changes interrogated at such hebetudinal length by Neal Stephenson in his Baroque Cycle would be forcing their green shoots through the chinks in our Arena home; and the humans of the West would

seen be processing the things of the world, transforming the dumb density of things-in-themselves (like wheat, or silver, or a newly invented engine) into representations of the thing: counters in vast quasi-organic systems of exchange. (The Internet was a blink away.) It is precisely at this point, with Europe entering cusp, when Europe was beginning to circulate, that *Arabian Wine* begins.

Matteo Benvenuto, younger son in a dynasty of traditional Venetian traders, plans to introduce coffee, the Arabian wine of the title, into Europe (in our history, coffee did indeed begin to infiltrate Europe around this time, but mainly through Vienna); his colleague, Gaspare Treviso, having invented a steam-driven pump, plans to use the technical wisdom of the ancients to build a proper steam engine (in our world – see Stephenson for lots and lots of details – the utilization of engines was still decades away). Each of these initiatives requires of its promulgator some capacity to think in terms of interacting markets, systems of exchange, interlocking patterns of influence and finance which Feeley describes repeatedly in terms that evoke hydraulics or music.

Coffee, for Matteo, has a systemic effect when sipped, “like a successive revelation, as though the most perfect madrigal was playing in the grotto of his humors, its chords encompassing ever-richer harmonics. Sunlight glittered in fat flakes upon the water, details grew sharper, and the texture of the stone blocks became real.”

Feeley never focuses on music as such, except by inference; but by 1609 or so the great conquering system of Western music had reached early maturity – the exchange device of well-tempering the keys would soon allow every piece of music to negotiate with every other piece of music, and opera had already begun to allow humans to negotiate their liberating conspiracies within ensembles of exchange – and it is clear he knows exactly what he is doing when he has coffee opening “the mind to the vibrancy of the world beyond, where a man strides free in the brightening tones of dawn . . .” It is in moments of illumination like this – and in some of the glowing descriptions of Venice just as that great city is about to fade into pantomime and tourism and sink – that I think we begin to understand how ruthlessly Feeley is teasing us with hope.

This teasing has costs. Readers unwilling to abandon all hope, and who may read sf in the expectation that something works, will find Feeley’s short novel (his second) offensively deceptive; and may fail to notice

how gracefully and compactly he has applied what must have been extensive research – the description of the Arsenal, the Venetian shipyards constructed as an ur-assembly line, is thorough but deft. And they may fail to value the deep obduracy of the book, the adamancy of its pinioning of the world in the amber of Unawake, its deep refusal to sound the song. They may also balk at the discovery that, in the end, nothing has really happened at all – Matteo, who is anyhow fatally passive in his attempts to work up his markets, is arrested by the Inquisition, and gives up; Gaspare’s engine is confiscated, and is instrumental in a final climax that shuts all doors, and Gaspare is done. All of this is noise in a vacuum, which is of course not noise at all. (One is perhaps meant to be reminded of William Golding’s ‘Envoy Extraordinary’ [1956], which he turned into a fine play, *The Brass Butterfly* [1958].) There is no change. Within the frame of *Arabian Wine* the world we know cannot happen. More precisely, *Arabian Wine* is our world not happening.


Here in the instructed chaos of the 21st century, after the silence of Feeley’s palinode upon Progress, it is maybe time to glance for constancy at something comfortable with the entire planet in all its cacophony. We come to **Tokyo Cancelled**, whose world-comfortable young author, Rana Dasgupta (who was born and raised in the UK; and who has lived in France, the USA, Malaysia and currently India) has managed to create a book that does seem conformal with our dazing diurnals. The structure of *Tokyo Cancelled* is simple enough, comprising thirteen stories which nest within a *Decameron* frame; it is ‘told’ over the course of one night by thirteen stranded travellers. Tokyo – the idea or destination or eidolon or signpost of Tokyo, not the old archaic thing itself – has been cancelled, due to snow. The travellers have been stuck overnight at an airport in an unnamed country. We learn none of their names, and soon realize that their physical selves are no more than pixels passing through, a little morbidez from the fall into ‘reality’ perhaps, but hey no problem – next day, when Tokyo uncancels, their plane takes off, and they are gone. Nothing is fixed or tangible, except the stories they decide to tell each other. These unnamed humans are dislocated pixels in the world; it is their stories (which anyone could tell) which connect the dots. It is in these tales – some fabulous, a couple sf, a couple almost mimetic, one or two seemingly redacted from fable – that we gain some refracted mosaical sense of the

world their tellers (who are us) now inhabit. For Dasgupta in *Tokyo Cancelled*, that world of ours is a kind of Arabian Nights, full of djinns and satraps, merchants and caravan-series: rather like Heathrow. It is, in other words, a Land of Fable – a term which has been defined as a territory whose roots are in this world, but which is in some aspects impossible (I paraphrase myself from *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* [1997]). The difference here is that Dasgupta establishes no gradient in *Tokyo Cancelled* between tales of the possible and tale of the impossible: in the loose-slung compendious nest of the book, to tell a tale is to make it so. If *Tokyo Cancelled*, as a whole, conveys any message, it is that, in the Land of Fable which is the 21st century, it is best not to be mute. After all, it's Scheherzade who makes it through the night.

The tales themselves vary widely in length, quality, tone. Some are twice-tolds; some seem utterly original. Most are set in something like the present, though dates are never given. Most of the protagonists are dislocated from their place of origin, or traders; or both; but old families are found, or new ones gained. The first tale, 'The Tailor', is perhaps the most traditional: in a 'small, carefree' land somewhere close to Babylon, a tailor is cheated by a prince, goes to the capital city for redress, suffers durance and dismay for years, finally tells the king his story, which auditors confirm contains all thirteen levels of meaning necessary for a great tale, and is given redress. In the second, 'The Memory Editor', set in London, a young man is hired by an agency which houses the vast array of records that describe and picture every human being's every moment; his job is to edit out the painful bits; the tale continues hyperbolically into the futuristic. The third tale is about an immensely rich entrepreneur who cannot sleep; it is also about Rapunzel. And so on. The tales have a habit of beginning in one place and ending elsewhere, or in the place of origin radically transformed; their protagonists also under transformations, often high velocity, sometimes permanent. There is no lifestimesalary, no safe house; but there are nests within nests, and implausible continuances of deep love, and returns at the end of things. By the close of the book, there is a sense that one has experienced a great deal of survival. *Tokyo Cancelled* is not only a fine nest of stories (some of which are superb); it is a *vade mecum*; it is instructions for chaos.

Short note: Holly Phillips is a good writer who is going to get better, if only by learning what not to publish. About half the

stories of **In the Palace of Repose** are crude wooden-nickel reprises or prefigurings of the other half of the volume, the half that contains the stories genuinely worth collecting. Phillips' better tales are shapely, varied, the right length (this can be a rare virtue), and guarded in their treatment of her Magic-Lozenge favourite character: the damaged young female artist who gulps gales of life through the baleen of some pretty conventional work. (A couple of the less-good stories are less guarded.) I'll mention a few of the tales which make one wish the next book will be full of them. The title story is superb, a very European/Kafkaesque political parable which encompasses a Season myth which splits it open in time for spring. 'The Other Grace' neatly equipposes two explanations for the sudden memoryless awakening into 'her' body of a young woman named Grace: either she is a victim of amnesia; or she is simply a soul/psyche awakened into a strange body, which she must now learn to operate in a human way. I am simultaneously happy with both readings. 'A Woman's Bones', which is set in (I think) 1920s Asia, very intriguingly begins to open the door into a young female archaeologist's discovery of an primordial shape or shadow, but hurls the tale into the void at the moment it begins to open – at the point where, I rather think, the work should have begun, I mean here the hard work of following through on something good (and not losing it). And 'Variations on a Theme' is bigger than the words that tell it: scenes set in a music academy in 1916 and 2003 double one another, as do the humans, though the music played in 2003 is very much greater than the music of 1916, and Phillips manages to make one feel the difference in the bones of the ear.

I hope Holly Phillips has more of 
the late music to play.

TIGHTPURSE, LOOSE CHANGE, WOODEN NICKEL



KAZUO ISHIGURO



NEVER LET ME GO
KAZUO ISHIGURO
 Faber&Faber hb, 263pp, £16.99

Rick Kleffel writes: As

Never Let Me Go begins, Kathy, at the age of 31 surprisingly still a 'carer', finds herself in the position of caring for Ruth and Tommy, her best friends back when they were all students at Hailsham. Ruth and Tommy are now both 'donors'. Science fiction readers know from the get-go that these words are euphemisms, but Kathy effortlessly slides past them and into her story of growing up at Hailsham. It's not an unusual story, at least at first. Hailsham seems to be a sort of idyll of the English boarding school. The students mingle together in the universal fashion of children growing up. Large friendships, small jealousies, and the everyday tragedies of children growing into awkward adolescence then eventually into adulthood loom large here. Ruth, Kathy and Tommy become friends and eventually more than friends. They grow together and then apart. But euphemisms and cues quickly lead the reader to understand that this is no school as we know schools, and these are not students as we know students. There's something very wrong here, but amidst the diaphanous veils of Kathy's recollections it's all too easy for the reader and for Kathy to shuffle all the bad stuff aside while we centre on the characters we come to care so much about.

By focusing on the minutia of the characters' lives and feelings, Ishiguro gives the world behind those lives and feelings reality through its relationship to the characters and their feelings. It's a sly way for this writer to enter the world of science fiction literature. Readers who frequent the genre will find Ishiguro's approaching bracing and refreshing, reminiscent of the best examples of what was once known as social science fiction. Theodore Sturgeon once worked and Ursula K. Le Guin still works in this vein. Ishiguro keeps his innovations and inventions well in the background for most of the novel, and this tactic serves readers, the writer and the novel quite well. We know enough to guess what's going on without feeling as we're being talked down to. *Never Let Me Go* is a

gripping novel not only by virtue of the veracity of its characters but also due to the level of deception the narrator manages to put between herself and her world. Kathy is the kind of prim woman who knows about the 'horror movie stuff' involved in living in the real world. But she's focused on the here and now, on the what-we-can-do as opposed to the what-has-been-done.

Ishiguro's focus on the characters may at first seem like the usual focus of literary authors. His prose is gorgeous and spare, his touch light and unassuming. *Never Let Me Go* is never less than delightful to read. But the focus on the small aspects of characters serves a very science-fictional plot point. All that gorgeous prose builds up a wave of understanding that breaks over the reader in a precisely timed penultimate scene. The careful characterization serves to set up a classic science-fictional understanding that is brilliantly realized and quite timely. The implications of Ishiguro's novel spread out with a seismic power.

Ishiguro reveals to the readers the souls of Kathy H. and her friends, Ruth and Tommy. With meticulous language he creates an aura of mystery. You'll be breathlessly turning the pages to find out how much Kathy is willing to tell herself about her own life, her own fate. These people love one another and themselves for the same reasons the reader does. This much is perfectly clear. We want the small miracles to work out, in their lives and ours. Of course, readers will also see their own souls in the mirror that Ishiguro creates for Kathy. And like Kathy, in the depths of that mirror, we'll be able to see our own darknesses, our own deceptions, our own completions. No less real. No easier to live with.

Rick Kleffel met Kazuo Ishiguro at RQED in San Francisco and conducted the following interview:

I'd like to talk to you about the element of the fantastic that is in all your novels, in that they all take place in the speakers' minds. I'd like to talk about how that filtering experience happens.

After my first novel, I had this kind of odd revelation, which was prompted by my writing a short screenplay for British television. It occurred to me that my novel and my screenplay weren't very different in the way that they worked, technically, and this gave me a kind of sense of dissatisfaction. Because I thought

novels, if they were to survive as a viable art form, they had to offer readers a unique experience, something actually very different in kind from the kind of experience they might have by switching on their television set or going into the cinema. And from there on, I tried to develop a style that was quite interior. I thought the novel was very strong here, where perhaps filmed drama was weakest.

In books you can go deeply into a character's mind, and particularly a narrator's mind and into his or her unconscious as well. So that's how I began that journey, and at times that's taken me to weird places.

Could you tell us about how memory plays a part in creating an aura of the fantastic in your novels, because you're not really seeing reality, you're seeing a filtered version of reality.

That's the only kind of reality I'm interested in. Often in my books, I'm not really interested so much in what really happened to somebody, I'm more interested in what that person says happened to him or to her. I'm interested in that subjective personal account, and that's shifting all the time. So sometimes in my books, somebody will give an account of something that happened in the past, and then later in the book, they'll give a slightly revised account of that same meeting. But the element of the fantastic? In my earlier books, I tried to get memory to work in much the way that I thought memory worked for anyone of us. It's only the ambiguity that makes it slightly, once removed from reality.

But I'd say from my fourth novel – *The Unconsolable* – onwards I started



to enter into a slightly different terrain. Memory was still involved, but I guess I was trying to create a new kind of landscape that wasn't entirely realistic. And so *The Unconsoled*, and to some extent the novel I wrote after it, *When We Were Orphans*, they feature a landscape that to some extent accommodates and bends to meet the irrational wishes and desires of the narrator.

Never Let Me Go has been termed a work of science fiction, but it's not really science fiction, is it?

Well, these labels don't worry me too much. There's a science element in it. There's a dystopian landscape, which is a backdrop. It probably won't be spoiling it too much for your readers if I just say the premise in one sentence, which is that it follows the lives, the loves, the relationships and friendships between these three kids who grow up to be young adults. They gradually discover who they are, which is that they are cloned children, and they've been cloned for a particular purpose, which is to supply organs for an organ donation program. But the entire world of the novel exists just in the world of these cloned children, so they don't really have perspectives that go beyond it. They don't question the program. Just as we accept that certain things are the way they are, that after seventy, eighty, ninety years we can expect to die, these kids, in much the same way, accept that after twenty-five or thirty years, they'll die. Their fate is laid out for them. They don't worry about how to run away or rebel against the system. For them, that's a given, and they ask all the big questions that we ask over the course of our lifetimes, but for them, it's compressed and made very urgent because their time is so short. So you can call it science fiction if you like, in that I've used a scientific framework, or landscape, in which there are scientific possibilities that don't exist right now, despite the fact that I've set the book in the 1990s. I've just imagined a world where there have been breakthroughs in science that haven't in fact taken place. I worry less about genres and categories. I use whatever I can.

I don't read very much science fiction in books, but a lot of the films I admire are what might be called science fiction. It's interesting that some of the greatest film directors ever have often made science fiction films, like Stanley Kubrick, or Andrei Tarkovsky, or Fritz Lang. I'm kind of used to that, ambitious art reaching out and using science to create –

all right, you want to call it science fiction, fine, but it might not fulfil a lot of the genre expectations of sci-fi fans.

Tell us a little bit more about some of the works in the genre that have interested or inspired you.

In movies the use of science or the use of fantastic settings have always struck me as fascinating. Lately, I've had a problem with settings. Whichever setting or location I choose to bring my story down in, I find that it has certain limitations. If I choose a historical setting, it's never quite the right match for what I'm wanting to do. I've looked at sci-fi films, particularly, like *2001: A Space Odyssey* by Stanley Kubrick, or *Solaris* by Andrei Tarkovsky, or *Metropolis* by Fritz Lang, as well as what you might call the more genre-conscious sci-fi movies, from people like Ridley Scott. The *Alien* series, or the way James Cameron makes his movies, the *Terminator* movies, or *Aliens*, it's very interesting how metaphor is used. Just because you enter immediately into a fictional landscape, where the usual expectations of realism are announced to have been abandoned right from the word go, I think the reader or the viewer is obliged to work harder; there's always this question 'Where am I? How does this world operate?'. I find that quite an exciting place to put the reader.

In my latest book – although, as I say, it's not sci-fi in any conventional sense – I've tried very much to put the reader in exactly the same place these young children are in. They don't know how the world around them works and the reader doesn't either, because they sense that this isn't like a realistic novel, there's some kind of strange landscape and they don't know what the rules are. What is going on here? Is it some kind of worldwide program of sinister intent? They're trying to work things out gradually with little clues in exactly the way that the main characters are.

You've used science fiction almost as a mystery: 'What is this world and how does it connect to ours?'

I guess so, but I have to say probably what I'm most interested in is, at the heart, what happens to individuals and their relationships. I'm interested in that question 'So what does it mean to be human?'. So in this novel, I can ask that question in an almost literal way because I've introduced the notion that these people are clones. Their very humanness is challenged by other characters.

I thought it was remarkably clever in this novel the way that the detailed, careful, precise relationships, the way you've created the characters, actually plays into the central science fictional question of, as you say, 'What is human?'

I think without that, the enterprise is deeply undermined. I think one of the powers of fiction is that it can give a real sense of what it means to be human, because it operates at that emotional level, and asks readers to empathize and feel human emotions. Non-fiction, journalism, reportage, all these things can contribute to a much more precise and nearer way into discussions about ethical issues. You can argue your point, you can present evidence, but fiction is very flabby when it comes to argument and polemic. There's no disciplined system of presenting an argument one way or the other, or of claiming where your sources come from. It's hopeless when it comes to making some sort of point. But I think that fiction is very powerful in that it does give a sense of human experience. It manages to simulate and create in the reader's mind emotions that you don't usually have in your own life by following that of the characters. So I think it's a particularly apposite way to ask this question, 'What are the things that are important about being human?'

And if your life is actually very limited and curtailed, and you know that it's all going to come to an end pretty rapidly, is it worthwhile working up the energy, the motivation to tackle the entanglements of love and friendship and work and creating art, if just in a few years, you're going to donate organs and die anyway? I want the feeling to come over as strongly as possible that yes, even if it's short, it's worth it, it's what you do while you're here that makes a difference. For that reason, I wanted to focus on the tender, the decent relationships in this book. In the past, I've tended to focus often on the more negative sides of human behaviour, the weaknesses and the fears and the cowardice of certain characters, and create rather grotesque characters around negative traits, almost as warnings to myself and my readers: 'Go down that path and you'll waste your life'. This time my strategy was different. In an odd kind of way, despite its very bleak, what you might call sci-fi or dystopian backdrop, this is my most cheerful novel. As I was writing it, I was trying to celebrate the essential decency of people. ☒




CONSTANTINE: IT'S CLEARLY BEEN A DIFFICULT CROSSING-OVER

NICK LOWE



MUTANT POPCORN

FILM REVIEWS

 Today we're going to learn about HELL. You're never too young to think about spending eternity on fire being ripped apart by things without faces because you didn't love Jesus enough. The truth is, here on this plane we're just animated digital puppets in a cosmic two-player game between the world above us and the world below. Up in the sky is the place we aspire to end up, if only we can get through the gates. But if we fail, we fall: down through the undercity to a fiery place presided over by the demonic embodiment and source of all evil, where only the furnace awaits. And the darkest secret is that between the gods above and the demons below is an unholy alliance of conspiracy and shared purpose which must be broken

if our world is to survive.

We'll get to Keanu in a moment, but this is actually Blue Sky's family animation **Robots**, whose unnervingly forthright coding of space between the warring worlds of boardroom and undercity is just one strand of an alarming attempt at a grand unified plot which aims to bind together *all* the major Hollywood mythologies about success, class, capitalism, self-realisation, fathers and sons, heaven and hell – and to unleash the whole lot on a universal family audience. It's not for the faint-hearted, especially the scenes in a scarier version of *Futurama*'s Robot Hell where, as Robin Williams' character shudderingly explains, "They melt you down and turn you into *something else*."

Here's how it works. Young Rodney

Copperbottom grows up on the poverty line in nowheresville because his father opted for a career washing dishes instead of following his dream. "You're the handmedown son of a dishwasher," sneers Dad's slavedriving boss, "and that's all you'll ever be!" But as a youngster Rodney was touched by the entrepreneurial dream on seeing a very rich, fat robot on TV ("He's the head of Bigweld Industries! He invents things to make the world better!"), who inspired him with the company slogan 'You can shine whatever you're made of'. "He's talking to me, dad!" cries an impressionable Rodney, so a sympathetic Dad instructs him in the fundamentals of capitalism: "Look around for a need, and start coming up with ideas to fill a need." Looking close to home, Rodney

It's not for the faint-hearted, especially the scenes in a scarier version of Futurama's Robot Hell where, as Robin Williams' character shudderingly explains, "They melt you down and turn you into something else"



invents Wonderbot, which will put his dad out of a job by doing his work at fifty times the speed, and with only a bite from a bagel for his break. No more pesky minimum-wagers to complain about their lack of union rights, toilet facilities, insurance! Surely Bigweld Industries will pay good money for this?

So Rodney heads off to the big city with a headful of American dreams to seek his fortune, validate his self-esteem, and prove himself to his father by succeeding where the old man failed. But as Williams' streetwise loser observes, the stakes are high and the odds are stacked against him: "If you can make it here you'll make it anywhere, and if you can't make it here, welcome to the club." Alas, Bigweld is under the new management of

gunmetal-suited profiteers who won't let our hero in the gate; and sure enough, by the end of day one he's a reject and a failure, dossing and scavenging with the lost souls of the undercity, and ashamed to call his father up and report the collapse of his dreams. In the wetware world, the sequel would be a brief career in hustling, addiction, and petty crime, terminated by one of the retirement plans traditionally associated with same. But this is Robot City, which is like our world only completely mechanical, and things run to a different algorithm here.

For all its aspirations as a family entertainment, *Robots* is a densely allegorical, unsettling film that sits more squarely than it intends in the tradition of the great robot fictions from Capek to Sladek, using the machine-people myth as a tool to think genuinely uncomfortable thoughts about the industrial human world. In *Robots* there are no humans, no creators to mimic; this is a parallel or perhaps post-human world of anthropomorphic self-replicating machines, erasing the distinction between consumer and commodity in an unnerving thought-experiment in



the logic of market capitalism. *Robots* imagines a world where citizens' very lives are treated like cars and computers: commodities where the industrial profit model depends on rapid obsolescence, pressuring consumers into frequent full-scale upgrades rather than low-level maintenance repairs. And in an economy without a socialist safety net, old age, disability, and illness lie at the mercy of the monopolistic corporate providers of spare parts and the ability of the consumer to afford them; and that, children, is how corporate capitalism creates third-world poverty by pricing essential products and services out of the reach of those who need them most. Phew! Is this fun or what? Now let's all break for a hilarious foot-fight on ball bearings.

Needless to say, it's least convincing when it comes to proposing answers. Rodney's eco-friendly, make-do-and-mend small business in unlicensed private medicine is only a sticking-plaster solution, when what's needed is systemic reform. The answer turns out to lie in the messianic return of precisely the nostalgic corporate paternalism disdained by the new management. "Concern for the common robot," says the bad boss in his first boardroom briefing: "You don't come across old-fashioned values like that..." (beat, then yells:) "There's *no money in it!*" Yet that's exactly what the big boss proclaims on his second coming: "Profits, schmofits!" And as usual, the whole fantasy all takes place in a man's world where those who get what they want do so over the corpses of female characters' dreams. The cute tomboy heroine has to settle for being traded up for Halle Berry at the earliest opportunity, and moms do even worse. The evil corporate usurper turns out to be the traumatised victim of a failed family life with a failed dad and a literal mom from hell, while the mother who



For all its aspirations as a family entertainment, *Robots* is a densely allegorical, unsettling film that sits more squarely than it intends in the tradition of the great robot fictions from Capek to Sladek

has selflessly suppressed whatever dreams *she* might have had in order to raise a child and run a household on one minimum-wage income gets no reward but to see her husband paid off for his failure with a jazz instrument and permission to jack it all in and fulfil his own adolescent fantasies of stardom.

It's a dense, busy film, its unsettling storyline and cast of oddly unamiable characters offset by some fantastically good comic storyboarding, blink-and-miss rewind gags, and superb digital puppetry. But even a Ganz & Mandel rewrite hasn't stopped some of the set pieces looking like narrative spare parts bolted loosely in place, and technical virtuosity alone doesn't make jokes about farting competitions or ladies' fat arses more amusing. By the end, adults are left feeling faintly soiled and queasy; older children are mildly entertained and younger ones scared to blitherens, especially by the truly shocking Satan Mom; none express any interest in seeing it again.



Among the things *Robots* has a lot to say about is how intellectual property works. In *Robots'* dream world, you come up with an innovative idea that will make people happy, and you take it to a big corporation, who then license your creation, make lots of copies and sell them to a grateful world, and everyone ends up rich, happy, or both. In the world of flesh, things don't quite work that smoothly. At a time when comics properties are a seller's market in Hollywood, DC's Vertigo arm has consistently lucked out, with *Sandman* in particular a drawn-out nightmare to get filmed. It's a choice irony that the first Vertigo character to escape from what feels like an eternity in development hell is **Constantine**, and at the price of its hero's soul. To bring *Constantine* into our world, Vertigo have had to be willing to compromise their property to the extent of transplanting a flagship character and his roots across an ocean and a continent to LA, at a stroke discarding their two decades of investment in the cream of UK comics writers to develop a strong and authentic Brit-noir mythos and continuity. Waiting through the end titles will get you a feeble bonus scene but no trace of any creator credit, either to Alan Moore for the character or to Jamie Delano for establishing *Hellblazer*; nor any acknowledgment to

Garth Ennis, who in a juster world than this would have been first choice for Pope, for the rather fine lung-cancer-and-damnation plot (from his 1991 *Dangerous Habits* storyline) still recognisable as the film version's spine. All we get is a starkly corporate statement of ownership, like a flash of steel teeth in the credits.

It's clearly been a difficult crossing-over. More writers have come and gone than the credits attest, and the plot has the appearance of having been quilted together out of bits from a dozen different scripts – an impression only confirmed by the late-2002 Frank Cappello draft, in which several things still made some kind of sense and there was rather less dousing of Rachel Weisz's blouse for her action scenes. On the plus side, the switch of the original prologue from Turkey to Mexico really drives home the message about the need to step up those volunteer border patrols to prevent indestructible demon-possessed psychos armed with hell-raising relics from vaulting over the fence and causing all our burger cattle to drop dead before heading off



to LA to bring Satan's son into the world and launch the end of days. Nobody say we weren't warned. What's come out the other end of all this is not by any means a complete disaster, and there's quite a lot to enjoy if you can just get past the figure of Keanu filling the entrance with the intimidating bulk of his personality, depth, and range. Looking back at twenty years of *Hellblazer* highs and lows, one's first thought wouldn't normally be "Hey, this would be a great vehicle to reteam the stars of *Chain Reaction*!" – but at least it means our hero looks nothing at all like the star of *Brimstone and Treacle*, which was an intolerably naff idea even in 1985 and a millstone round the character's neck for the first year or two. What *Constantine*

What *Constantine* does capture rather well is the source material's batty punk theology, Jesuitically convoluted concept hits, gymnastic plot contortions, and backstory you need to hack through with a machete



does capture rather well is the source material's batty punk theology, Jesuitically convoluted concept hits, gymnastic plot contortions, and backstory you need to hack through with a machete. The visions of hell itself are glorious and far too short (there were more in earlier drafts, but you can see the money bonfiring away by the second), and Ennis's ending is unusually satisfying and clever by Hollywood standards. The film knows this all too well, and drags out the final act to exhaustion with hellish pacing in which the clock stops and (as the man himself reminds us about infernal time) every second is an eternity. In movie hell, it's always bullet time. Think about that next time you consider skipping confession. ☒

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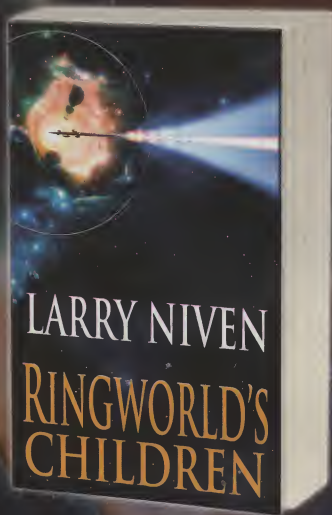
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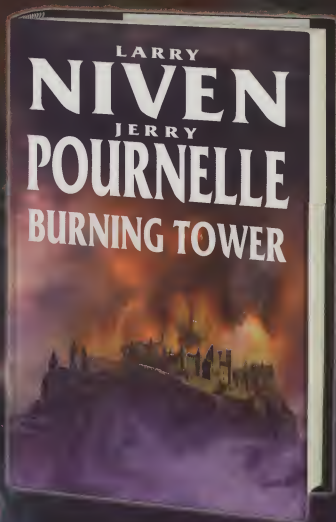


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